

COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

November / December 2008 • cjr.org

Overload!

How journalism can save us all from too much information
BREE NORDENSON

FALSE RELIGION

How the GDP distorts economic coverage
JONATHAN ROWE

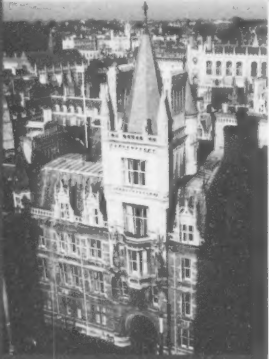
MURROW'S BOY

Dan Rather in high definition
JESSE SUNENBLICK

MUSIC LESSONS

What the press can learn from Kid Rock and Lil Wayne
ALISSA QUART





Templeton-Cambridge Journalism Fellowships in Science & Religion

"If there's one intellectual topic that's starting to blaze red hot, it is the relationship between science and religion."

Gregg Easterbrook, *Atlantic Monthly*

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Will Saletan, *Slate*

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"Between the rigid literalists and the ranting atheists, there is vast space for intellectual engagement over matters of science and faith—a space we explored daily during this stimulating and intense fellowship."

Sharon Schmickle, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*

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The fellowship, funded by the John Templeton Foundation, enables ten print, broadcast, or online journalists to pursue an intensive two-month course of study in issues of science and religion. The program includes three weeks of seminars at the University of Cambridge in the U.K. featuring eminent authorities in the field. Fellows will be paid a stipend in addition to travel expenses to Cambridge.

The fellowship seeks to promote a deeper understanding and a more informed public discussion of the interface of science and religion. Potential areas of study include Islam and science, neuroscience, cosmology, quantum uncertainty, multiverses, the New Atheism, and spirituality and health.

Applicants must demonstrate an interest in the field, originality of thought displayed in previous writings, and a superior record of journalistic achievement. The awards are open to journalists with a minimum of three years' experience, though priority will be given to mid-career and senior journalists. The fellowship program is looking for journalists who show promise of making a significant contribution to the public's understanding of the complex issues in the field.

The application deadline is Monday, December 15, 2008.

For more information, or to apply for the fellowships, go to the website www.templeton-cambridge.org

COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

November/December 2008

"To assess the performance of journalism... to help stimulate continuing improvement in the profession, and to speak out for what is right, fair, and decent."

—from the founding editorial, 1961



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ANNOUNCES

The Kaiser Media Fellowships in Health for 2009

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In 2009, the Kaiser Media Fellowships Program will award up to ten fellowships to print, television, radio, and online journalists interested in health policy issues. The aim is to provide journalists with a highly flexible range of opportunities to pursue individual projects combined with group briefings and site visits on a wide range of health and social policy issues.

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Applications must be received by March 3, 2009

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The Kaiser Family Foundation is a non-profit private operating foundation, based in Menlo Park California, dedicated to producing and communicating the best possible information, research and analysis on health issues.

COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

Published by the Columbia University
Graduate School of Journalism

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Columbia Journalism Review (USPS 0804-780)
(ISSN 0010-194X) is published bimonthly. Vol. XLVII, No. 4
November/December 2008. Copyright © 2008 Columbia
University. Subscription rates: one year \$27.95; two years
\$41.95. Periodical postage paid at New York, NY, and at
additional mailing office.

POSTMASTER: send form 3579 to Columbia Journalism
Review, P.O. Box 578, Mt. Morris, IL 61054.

Opening Shot



Some sixteen states passed laws against predatory lending in the years after 2001. It is not as if public officials were not talking about the problem. Then, as sure as thunder follows lightning, came the foreclosures. They reached two million in 2007—up 75 percent from 2006 and 149 percent from 2005. They are rising still in 2008, and the worst may be yet to come. The press didn't totally miss such clues, but when the evidence is finally and thoroughly sifted, journalism likely won't look so good at connecting financial practices and regulatory policy to the lives of ordinary people. Cratering loans led to scenes like the one above all across the country and, at the other end of the bargain, they exploded inside the portfolios of financial institutions around the world. There are profound and multiple reasons why nobody, including journalists, connected those dots, but one factor is simply that it is a challenge for anyone in our time to see patterns in the blizzard of information that blows through our heads every waking moment. We live in an age of information overload. The volume and velocity of information increases exponentially, but the ability of people to sort it out and pay attention does not. Given the laws of supply and demand, the value of information is declining. Information overload has major implications for how people consume the news, and journalists need to rethink their role in order to again restore the value of what they do, a subject that Bree Nordenson begins to explore in our cover story on page 30, part of a package in the issue with additional articles and interviews online. We hope you find them useful and interesting. **CJR**

Moving day Damien DeNeir and his grandmother, Kim, casualties of the subprime loan crisis, leaving their home near Denver in April.



Drawing Lines

Why do we let political operatives act like journalists?

Nicholas Kristof and William Kristol both write regular columns about politics and policy for the *New York Times* op-ed page. But one is a journalist (Kristof) and the other is a political operative who last summer was listed by a Council on Foreign Relations report as an informal part of John McCain's foreign-policy brain trust (Kristol). The latter, writing once a week since January, has had five published corrections for errors of fact in his column; the former,

writing twice a week in that same period, has had no published corrections but did take the extraordinary step of using an entire column to apologize to Steven J. Hatfill, the scientist who was named (and recently exonerated) by the government as the leading suspect in the 2001 anthrax attacks; in 2002, Kristof had written columns urging closer scrutiny of the then-anonymous "person of interest" who turned out to be Hatfill.

Our point is that journalists have a fundamentally different relationship to facts than that of most political operatives. Facts are the foundation of what journalists do—get them wrong and your credibility suffers; get them wrong often enough and you'll be out of a job. For creatures of politics, facts are malleable—weapons to be used as necessary to produce victory at the polls and in the policy-making arena. Journalists are taught to check facts and assemble them without regard for whether they like the picture that emerges;

political operatives only have use for those facts that enhance the picture they want to project.

But the larger issue here is that too many news consumers don't make this distinction between Kristof and Kristol—both are simply members of the vast, undifferentiated Media. In recent years, news outlets have increasingly encouraged this lack of discrimination. There has always been some crossover between the worlds of politics and journalism (see Gergen, David), but the blurring accelerated with the rise of cable news. Today, it has become so common that we may never be able to tease it apart in any meaningful way. Michael Gerson, a former adviser to President Bush, writes a column for *The Washington Post*; Joe Scarborough, a former congressman, hosts a news show on MSNBC; Newt Gingrich, Dick Morris, and Karl Rove are analysts on Fox News; CNN's Best Political Team on Television has Donna Brazile, Bill Bennett, Ed Gibson, Paul Begala, et al, sitting cheek-by-jowl with actual journalists like John King and Campbell Brown. How can we expect viewers to not lump us all together?

Such willful blurring of the line between journalists and political partisans has consequences. One is the shock—even outrage—that results when a journalist has the temerity to behave like one. Recall the uproar when CNN's Brown challenged Tucker Bounds, McCain's spokesman, to provide an example of a decision Sarah Palin had made in her role as commander in chief of the Alaska National Guard. The McCain camp had held up this experience as evidence of

her readiness for the vice presidency, and when Brown asked Bounds to back up that claim, he either could not or would not—and Brown wouldn't let it go. Bounds cried foul, suggesting she was somehow out of line. Hmmm. Tenacity and an adversarial tone. That *does* seem suspicious. In the days following that exchange, there was far too much serious discussion of Bounds's ridiculous charge.

The Brown-Bounds dustup was an early salvo in the McCain campaign's full-throated deployment of the well-worn media-bashing strategy—a strategy that benefits when everyone (from Nick Kristof to Bill Kristol to the anonymous blogger on the partisan site Daily Kos who spread a rumor that Palin's newborn son actually belonged to Palin's seventeen-year-old daughter Bristol) is mashed together under the banner of The Media. Serious news outlets do themselves—and the rest of us—no favors by encouraging this distorted understanding of what they do and why. **CJR**



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Judging Panel

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Ken Auletta, author; media columnist, *The New Yorker*

Dean Baquet, Washington bureau chief, *The New York Times*

Tom Brokaw, special correspondent, *NBC News*

Charles Gibson, anchor, "World News with Charles Gibson," *ABC News*

Ellen Goodman, columnist, *The Boston Globe*

Clarence Page, columnist/editorial board member, *Chicago Tribune*

Anna Quindlen, author; columnist, *Newsweek*

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Costs of Freedom

Thank you, CJR and Dean Starkman, for your urgently needed assessment of business journalists' performance on the mortgage and credit-crisis story ("Boiler Room," CJR, September/October). In citing some rare outstanding examples of an intelligible explanation of the complex marketplace mess, to which Main Street's mortgage brokers, Wall Street's mortgage packagers, and a vast universe of real-estate professionals all were party, Starkman's essay shines a bright light on the broader failure of business media to make the crisis understandable to ordinary mortals. Those ordinary people are the ones whose votes on November 4 will be largely based on their judgments regarding the best solutions to the economic crisis and (one hopes) on their sense of what it will take to make sure such an event doesn't happen again.

Starkman and other business journalists ought to delve even further into the record. He is absolutely right that the economic crisis is in part a product of criminal activity committed by mortgage brokers and lenders. But the far more disturbing reality is that the mortgage crisis would have happened even without screenings of *The Boiler Room* and the embellishments of the "art department" that doctored mortgage applications, because the actions of the Wall Street financiers, as well as most of the aggressive tactics used by mortgage brokers, were perfectly legal.

That's why "all of the above" companies, in the article's handy quiz, used "yield spread premiums" to essentially give mortgage brokers kickbacks for steering borrowers toward unpayable subprime loans. Federal judges during the 1990s had ruled this practice legal, and one decisive case pointed toward former Federal Reserve Chair Alan Greenspan's inaction on a 1993 law (meant to halt exactly such abuses in the marketing of subprime loans) as the basis for permitting the kickbacks.

As for the investment banks them-



The mortgage crisis would have happened anyway, because the actions of Wall Street were legal.

selves, virtually everything they did appears to have been well within the law—laws that Congress, the Reagan administration, and investment banks rewrote together during the 1980s in a fit of reckless deregulation. The regulatory actions that made the crisis possible must be understood, accurately, as the nation seeks a sustainable remedy.

Alyssa Katz

Adjunct assistant professor of journalism
Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute
New York University
New York, NY

Dean Starkman says in his essay, "Most journalists... retreat to the mushy middle." One of the most dangerous errors of American journalism is mistaking the center for neutral. The center is a mid-point on a sliding scale. Its place is determined by opinions and prevailing winds. Neutral is, or should be, the

radical willingness to find and communicate what's true, no matter whether that truth lies in the middle or to one side. Starkman was talking about Wall Street and the press's failure to take aim at "breathtaking corruption." But, he might just as easily have been talking about foreign policy or politics.

Years ago, when I was a *Los Angeles Times* staff writer in Little Rock covering Gennifer Flowers and began getting names over the transom of women with whom Clinton supposedly had had affairs, I asked editors back home what sort of story we wanted to pursue as a newspaper. I'll never forget the answer: "We don't want to join the circus; we just want to stay inside the tent."

That was not, I hasten to add, standard practice at the *Times*, which had one of the two best newsrooms in the U.S. at the time. But in a tawdry story we didn't know what to do with because American opinion was itself so divided, it was safe under that tent with all the other journalists.

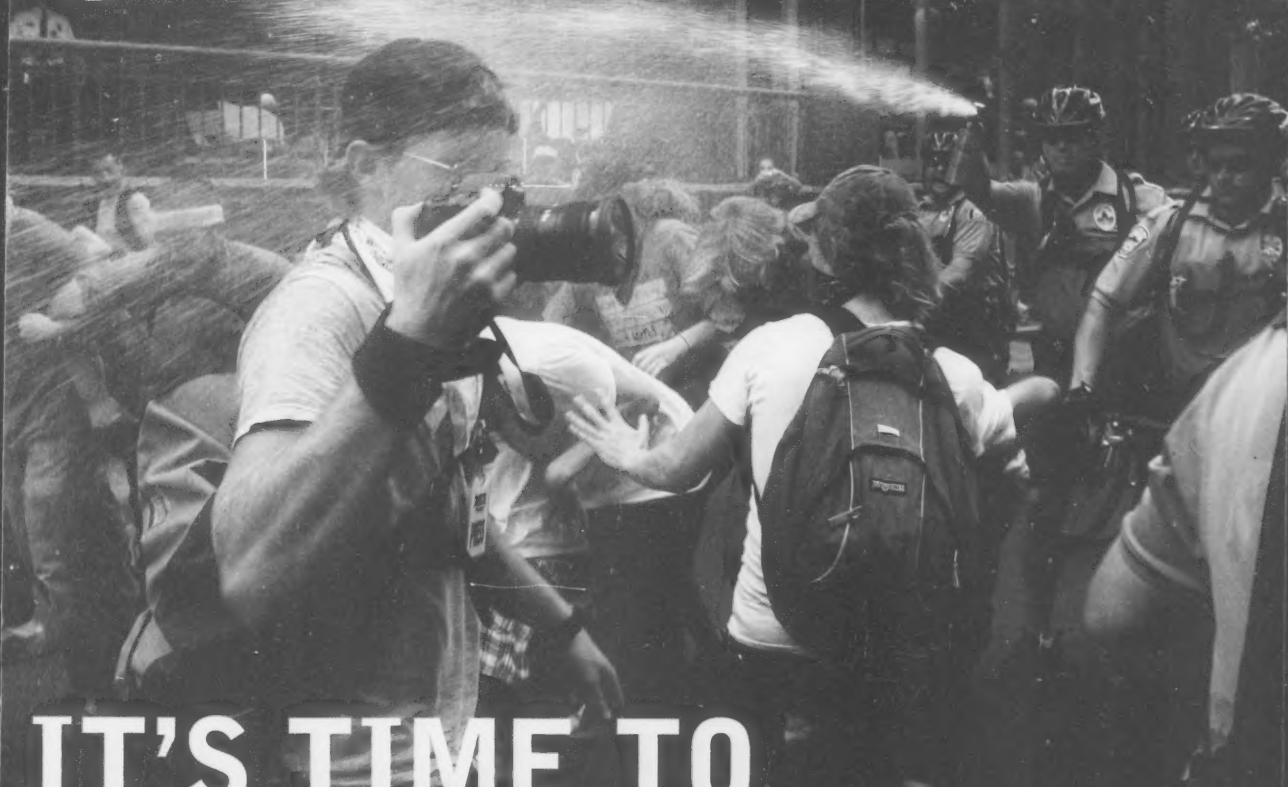
That was voyeuristic spectacle. No biggie, really. The issues today are far more critical, but too many journalists—television in particular comes to mind—are still sitting under that tent. The American public may never have needed clarity from its journalists more.

Especially when resources are so limited, I hope reporters ask themselves each day, what am I writing today that truly matters? When we are not bold enough to find and put forward the facts, our readers and viewers may well wind up losing their savings, their homes, or even their lives.

I hope Starkman's simple, intuitive term "The Mushy Middle" catches on as a sort of shorthand so reporters, and especially editors, can recognize it as the public hazard it is. Maybe if we identify the default habits that lead to the Mushy Middle, we can stop ourselves from stepping in it.

Laurie Becklund
Los Angeles, CA

JOURNALISM UNDER ATTACK



IT'S TIME TO TAKE A STAND

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ABOVE: A student journalist is pepper-sprayed covering protests outside the Republican National Convention on Sept. 1, 2008. AP photographer Matt Rourke was arrested and detained after taking this photo.

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RELIGION | NEWSWRITERS

Only Connect

I agree with your editorial "What Are Newspapers Selling?" (CJR, September/October). Newspaper editors should stop wringing their hands over the dire predictions of doom and gloom and get back to doing what they do best: identifying, exploring, and amplifying public-policy issues at the local, state, and national levels. Start by knowing and understanding the problems in your community, then dig deeper to uproot the causes and the consequences of taking action or ignoring the problems. Explain how each issue fits into readers' lives and livelihoods. Offer

suggestions and top them off with passionate editorials that encourage or admonish readers and leaders. By helping readers to learn and ultimately care more about public-policy issues, you will also enable them to form and express their values. Ultimately, these individual voices will merge into community values, which then can be used to set and shape a common agenda for elected representatives to work from. No other single community source is better equipped or positioned to do this than the newspaper.

James Russell

Comment posted on CJR.org

FROM CJR.ORG NOTES FROM OUR ONLINE READERS

IN "MY FORECLOSURE," CJR'S RYAN CHITTUM REACHED BEYOND THE STATS AND abstractions of the credit crisis to describe the slow-drowning experience of losing his childhood home—his father's illness and subsequent job loss, his mother's shame in paying for groceries with food stamps, the mounting debt, the crush of creditors, and, ultimately, eviction.

Ryan, as touching as your story was (and I say that with no sarcasm), we all know that most people facing foreclosure now are in the position they are in because of bad choices, not, as in your father's case, bad luck. I have sympathy for bad luck, but less so for bad choices—especially when I am being asked to fork out money for it.—*Carl Stevens*

Ryan, you've done an excellent job of putting a human face on something that would otherwise be a faceless statistic. Powerful stuff.—*Dale Brown*

Contrary to Chittum's assertion, any business journalist worth his or her salt who has covered this issue *has* talked to and received e-mails from dozens of people in this unfortunate situation. If they haven't, they wouldn't stay on the beat long enough to be called a reporter. The sad thing is there are so many stories to tell.—*Not a betting journalist*

Kudos for the real look into banks and their rip-off practices. The banks who loaned more than they have should be forced to offer up their guilty parties, and these criminals should be given the maximum penalty under the law. I am tired of this game, and the way that some people value money and profits over people.—*Katz Freedman*

In October, as the press spun the image carousel of Sarah Palin—from "gun-toting hockey mom" to Tina Fey's SNL caricature to "feisty, folksy frontierswoman"—CJR's Jane Kim, in "Sarah vs. Sarah," lamented that journalists were giving Palin a free pass when they abandoned issues for image.

Many of us out here beg to differ. It is about her stance on issues and her executive and political experience, which are strong. Only those voters who wish to elect a "rock star" rather than a leader will focus on image.—*Kecia*

Your article brings to mind one of the grossest journalistic gaffes since Palin's nomination: CNN repeatedly playing the Tina Fey bit. Although it was identified as such at the bottom of the screen, it contributed nothing to the newscast except to leave the viewer thinking the network was making an editorial judgment.—*Michele*

Until recently, newspapers had an effective monopoly on local advertising, which allowed them to make annual profits of 20 or 30 percent. The good ones took part of that profit and used it to create strong news organizations that could deliver quality journalism (and make their monopoly even more secure). All that changed with the Internet, which is not only a cheaper and faster way for people to get the news, but also a more efficient way for many advertisers to reach prospective buyers. As the newspaper monopoly on local news and advertising inevitably disappears, so do their 20 or 30 percent profits and the option of maintaining expensive well-staffed news organizations.

Guy Baehr

Comment posted on CJR.org

Divorcing the Mob

I was surprised to see the *Columbia Journalism Review* minimize the harm done by America's newspapers when they allow people to post abusive comments on their Web sites ("Louts Out," *CJR*, September/October). Oddly, *CJR* cites relatively mild attacks on journalists, who ought to be able to handle them; but more often, victims of graphic hate speech tend to be the most vulnerable—the poor and minorities.

I monitor news coverage of child welfare as part of the job I've held since leaving journalism. On those rare occasions when reporters profile an impoverished minority family who may have lost a child needlessly to foster care, you can count on a virtual lynch mob to form on the newspaper's comments section, under the protection of anonymity afforded by the newspaper's publishers. One vile comment after another, often complete with some sick parody of the supposed dialect of a racial minority, strips the story's subjects of all human dignity. Most involve a favorite theme of the mob: graphic calls for compulsory sterilization.

Study after study tells us that exposure to physical violence coarsens us to its effect and may make us a more violent society. What, then, does constant exposure to the rants of the virtual lynch mob do to the quality of public debate? When the worst, once-secret sentiments get implicit public sanction,

The Knight-Bagehot Fellowship



Columbia University is now accepting applications for the Knight-Bagehot Fellowship in Economics and Business Journalism.

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does posting such sentiments serve to make them more socially acceptable, more mainstream?

Before anyone whines about censorship: I'm suggesting only that newspapers apply the same standards to their Web sites as they do to their letters columns in print: except for unusual circum-

stances, no hiding behind anonymity. See how many virtual Klansmen stick around when you rip off their hoods.

Richard Wexler

Executive director

National Coalition for Child Protection Reform

Alexandria, VA

EDITOR'S NOTE

OSBORN "OZ" ELLIOTT, WHO DIED OF CANCER ON SEPTEMBER 28 AT EIGHTY-three, was remembered in the obituaries mostly for his achievements at *Newsweek*. As its editor in the 1960s and 1970s, he breathed new life into that magazine, strengthened its voice, and enticed more than a million new readers to it by 1976, when he stepped down. After a short stint with New York City as a dollar-a-year deputy mayor, he became the dean of Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism. He left that job in 1986, but kept one title here until 1988 that has not been mentioned in all the glowing write-ups: publisher of the *Columbia Journalism Review*.

I was a lowly part-timer here in those years and I'm not sure I ever spoke to the publisher other than to say hello. But I did notice that Spencer Klaw, the *CJR* editor who hired me, always seemed to return from his meetings with Elliott in an excellent mood. When he took the job, Klaw had insisted on a written contract that stipulated that the editor had full editorial control. Elliott, who knew a thing or two about editing, had zero problem with that. By all accounts, he absorbed many bolts aimed at *CJR* from the high church of journalism, whose cardinals did not always understand that journalism criticism could possibly mean criticizing *them*. He also understood that a serious magazine like ours always needs help raising money, and he raised it.

Elliott wore a bow tie at all times, I remember, and he was a raconteur. Dennis Giza, our deputy publisher, recalls telling him something about our fundraising history just minutes before a big *CJR* anniversary event. Oz then stepped to the lectern and spun the information into a lengthy, funny, and pointed anecdote, wowing the crowd and amazing Dennis. Oz Elliott was a friend of *CJR* who understood, fostered, and celebrated its mission, and we would like to say so in public.

ON TO THE FUTURE: SOMETIME THIS MONTH, MAYBE BY THE TIME YOU READ this, our Web site will have a new face. We think it will help us better display our lively and incisive daily content—if you have not yet visited *CJR.org*, please do—as well as extend the reach of the print magazine in your hand.

You get your best value from *CJR* when you read us both in print and online. The cover story in this issue, for example—on how this age of information overload shapes and affects the consumption and delivery of news—will be augmented by stories and video on the Web site in coming days. We'll do the same thing next issue, when our cover package will explore transparency in government and finance—a subject that recent history makes paramount. We'll intensify our focused coverage online, too, on business reporting (The Audit), science and environmental journalism (The Observatory), and, as a new administration moves in, reporting on politics and policy (Campaign Desk). The redesign will include more ways for readers to join the discussion, and more features to discuss.

With a new president heading for Washington in a shaky economic environment, and with the entire news industry searching for the path to a viable future in a time of incredible upheaval, the coming year will be pivotal for journalism. *CJR* will be covering it.

—Mike Hoyt

Deepening the Discussion

Thanks for devoting a page to *The Baltimore Sun's* series on buprenorphine (Darts & Laurels, *CJR*, September/October). Lawrence Lanahan's assessment of the stories brought additional attention to the serious, underreported problems arising from the government's embrace of this addiction treatment. As the lead editor of this project, I only wish Lanahan had presented a more complete picture. The *Sun* stories documented not just the pattern of illegal street sales and abuse emerging as more doctors prescribe "bupe," itself a powerful narcotic; they also showed that federal policies intended to make the drug widely available were in fact undermining its potential for treating heroin and painkiller addiction on a large scale.

Congress gave doctors authority to prescribe bupe for take-home use by people addicted to heroin and opiate-based painkillers. But Congress required only eight hours of physician training in the complex problems of addiction, failed to dedicate a stream of funding to pay for bupe, and overlooked its potential for diversion and abuse.

The nation needs new tools for fighting opiate addiction. It also deserves broader discussion of the flawed approach taken by the government and public health establishment. This was the purpose of the series.

John H. Fairhall

City editor

The Baltimore Sun

Baltimore, MD

Corrections and Clarifications

In our September/October cover story "The Lee Abrams Experience" by Robert Love, we reported that the Tribune Company owns *amNewYork*—which is indeed true, but only partly. Cablevision also owns *amNewYork*, since July, when it entered into a joint venture with Tribune over *amNewYork*.

In our caption for our September/October Opening Shot, we identified the two women in the photo as family members of immigrant workers seized in the federal raid on Agriprocessors, a meat plant in Postville, Iowa. While it is possible the women could be family members, identifying them as such was an assumption on our part. **CJR**

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David Sington, Writer and Producer

Duncan Copp, Director

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Patrick Webb, Project Coordinator

East Oregonian Publishing Company for *Our Climate is Changing...Ready or Not*

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Currents



Let's Talk About Sex(ism)

It's by now understood that sexism, in some form, lodged itself into the gears of this election cycle from the very start. We saw it with Hillary Clinton, who endured the press's inane scrutiny of her demeanor and appearance, her "cackle" and her "cankles." And we saw it again with Sarah Palin, whose looks prompted a different sort of "bodily lit-crit," as one journalist

described it—she was Alaska's hot governor, and according to CNBC's Donny Deutsch, totally beddable.

The resulting furor—unleashed largely by feminists of the old guard—prompted some in the political establishment to see a Fourth Wave of feminism powering up from the ashes of '08. Bill Clinton, appearing on *The View* in late September, called sexism a

"subconscious" and therefore almost "insidious" presence in the press. Howard Dean has called for a "national discussion" of sexism.

Do we need such a discussion? Maybe. But amid all the knuckle dragging, there was evidence of real progress.

In an interview with *Newsweek*, Geraldine Ferraro, who in 1984 became the first woman to appear on a major party ticket, reminded us that when she was in the sexist crosshairs, she "couldn't speak about it." Her remarks lent credence to the idea that a diversity of criticism is always preferable to silence.

Liberal feminists like Gloria Steinem and Erica Jong wrote op-eds condemning the passing of the torch to an unworthy heir (Palin), but even they seemed taken aback by the rise of a second woman to the national political stage—one who fell short of Clinton on substance, but who more skillfully traded on her image. And while the label "hockey mom" wasn't—to them, at least—a qualification for office, it showed how far we've come in the quest for self-representation. (Had Ferraro trumpeted her mothering skills, she would have been hooted off the stage as not serious enough.)

Also advancing the conversation was pushback from women writers who saw the feminist outrage as an overreaction. E.J. Graff, at Slate's *XX Factor*, observed of Palin: "Madame Governor really shouldn't be treated as a full-employment program

'Here at our end of the forty-year war, there are no Norman Mailers. Only pollsters.'—Thomas Frank, lamenting the packaged interpretation of political coverage since the 1968 Democratic National Convention

for female pundits." Katha Pollitt, writing for *The Nation*, questioned the impulse to fish for answers in a single person, with a deadpan reminder not to "forget that op-ed staple, What Does This Mean for Feminism?" Over-attention bred self-indulgence, they warned, and risked dumbing down the discourse itself.

Their warnings matched the attempts by mainstream newspapers to draw distinctions between journalism and punditry. After *The Washington Post* was criticized for writing about Clinton's cleavage and *The New York Times* got knocked for parsing Clinton's "cackle," the *Times's* Katharine Q. Seelye reported the news, with a headline that read in part: EDITORS ADMIT ERRORS BUT NOTHING MORE. It was a guarded assessment of the criticisms leveled at the press, but valid in its qualification—that the egregious comments originated largely from pundits. More recently, Anne Kornblut in the *Post* warned the press about making knee-jerk recalibrations, instructing reporters covering Palin to instead contemplate "what is fair game now by comparing it with what was fair game" when Clinton made her political debut. Such responses may have been mild, but as digestible critiques, they opened the door to a conversation of what was equitable coverage and what wasn't.

The best illustration of the interplay between where

A Little Something for Your Trouble

Since January 2007, as the shrinking of our newsrooms continued apace, some 2,700 journalists accepted buyouts and moved on. Here is a list of the financial terms of a sampling of those buyouts. For a fuller list, go to CJR.org.

■ PAYMENTS ■ HEALTH CARE ■ OTHER

Bradenton Herald (Florida)

- Two weeks of pay for every year of service, maximum of twenty-six weeks' pay
- Health care subsidized for three months

The Buffalo News

- Two weeks of pay for every year of service, for up to one year; minimum offer starts at about \$60,000
- No health benefits

Los Angeles Times

- One week of pay for every six months of service, for up to fifty-two weeks
- The most recent offer provided medical coverage for that time span

The New York Times

- Three weeks of pay per year (up to 104 weeks) for employees with at least eleven years of service
- Eight months of health coverage for employees with eleven years of service
- Flat amount (between fifteen and thirty weeks of pay) for employees with fewer than eleven years
- Four months of health insurance for employees with fewer than eleven years

The News Tribune (Washington)

- Two weeks of pay for every year of service up to thirteen years
- Three months medical at the employee rate; employee can buy a full year of medical by foregoing two weeks' severance
- Outplacement counseling by a private firm

The Philadelphia Inquirer

- Two weeks of pay for every year of service; maximum of forty weeks of pay
- Money (and any left-over vacation) could be placed directly into an IRA

The Wall Street Journal

- "Early retirement package" offered to longtime senior reporters and editors: one-and-a-half times salary
- Benefits until eligible for Medicare or get new job

HARD NUMBERS

138 minutes of network evening newscast coverage (ABC, CBS, and NBC) of the Democratic National Convention, the week of August 25–29

76 minutes of evening newscast coverage of the Republican National Convention, the week of September 1–5

48 minutes of evening newscast coverage of Sarah Palin, the week of September 1–5

114 minutes of evening newscast coverage of Dan Quayle's selection in 1988, during convention week

43.3 percent of campaign stories dealing with the financial crisis the week of September 15–21

4.3 percent of campaign stories dealing with the economy as an issue, the week before

4 percent of Americans who have ever posted their own news content, including videos or photos

7 percent of Americans who post comments about news stories, even on occasion

60 percent of Americans who say they do not feel overloaded by the amount of news available

38 percent of Americans who say they do feel overloaded

51 percent of Americans who consider themselves news-grazers, getting their news from time to time rather than at regular times

19 percent of people aged eighteen to twenty-four who said they get no news on a typical day

Sources: The Tyndall Report, Project for Excellence in Journalism

—Megan McGinley

we are and where we think we should be in this debate over sexism, is another comment from Ferraro in the *Newsweek* interview: "I never thought we'd have the opportunity to see another woman go through it, this same election cycle, after the press had been put on notice." Ferraro framed the campaign coverage as a series of opportunities that the press had flubbed. But even encased in a criticism, the word "opportunity" rings optimistic—one might even say that it takes a page from a discussion that is already in progress.

—Jane Kim

Ties That Blind

FOR NEARLY THIRTY YEARS, the editors of medical journals have relied on public disclosure of researchers' conflicts of interest to alert readers to the possibility of bias in published studies, especially when they

are funded by the medical industry. It has been well documented in medical literature that the outcomes of industry-funded research tend to favor the sponsors' commercial needs.

In recent years, journalism has followed suit. Many media outlets have begun requiring reporters to report the industry ties of quoted expert sources. The Association of Health Care Journalists puts disclosure at the top of its statement of principles. But some reporters still omit this basic information about the clinicians and researchers who generate medical news:

- A *New York Times* front-page story on lung-cancer screening, by Gina Kolata, led with the claim—based on a study in the prestigious *New England Journal of Medicine*—that "millions of lives could be saved" by giving smokers annual CT scans for lung cancer. Earlier this year, *The Cancer Letter*, an investigative weekly, revealed that
- the study had been funded in part by a nonprofit called the Foundation for Lung Cancer: Early Detection, Prevention & Treatment, which, in turn, was wholly funded by the Vector Group, the parent company of tobacco giant Liggett & Myers. The *Times* covered the revelations of the tobacco-industry link with another front-page story.
- *Wall Street Journal* reporter Melinda Beck's column touting the benefits of vitamin D didn't mention that her most prominently quoted source, the executive director of "the nonprofit Vitamin D Council," worked for an organization whose primary corporate sponsor manufactured vitamin supplements, including vitamin D.
- Steven Sternberg of *USA Today* allowed the president of the National Osteoporosis Foundation to voice skepticism about risks from Merck's Fosamax, a popular osteoporosis drug.

He didn't tell readers that both the president and the foundation took money from Merck.

- A story by David Brown of *The Washington Post* about a study playing down the risks from drug-eluting stents failed to mention that the study was funded by Boston Scientific, Cordis, and Abbott Vascular, all makers of such stents.
- Reuters's Julie Steenhuisen didn't mention that the Harvard researcher behind a recent study suggesting that Novartis's Femara protects against breast-cancer recurrence worked as a consultant for Novartis among other major pharmaceutical firms.
- Hilary Hylton of *Time* quoted Jessica Kahn of Cincinnati Children's Hospital dismissing the side effects of Merck's human-papilloma-virus vaccine (Gardasil), but failed to mention that Kahn had been a paid speaker at Merck-sponsored events.
- Melissa Healy of the *Los Angeles Times* questioned the comparable efficacy of generic drugs to the original product, but didn't note that one of her main sources received consulting and speaking fees from a host of brand-name manufacturers.

These examples are not isolated instances. A recent survey by University of Minnesota journalism professor Gary Schwitzer found that half of 170 stories about medical studies quoted experts with ties to manufacturers with a stake in the outcome of the research. Only 39 percent of those stories—thirty-three out of eighty-five—reported those ties.

—Merrill Goozner

LANGUAGE CORNER DIAGNOSIS MURDERED Write LanguageCorner@cjr.org

"DIAGNOSED" HAS BEEN in the news a lot lately. Both Ted Kennedy and Robert Novak have been "diagnosed" with brain tumors, and many articles discuss children "diagnosed" with autism or the rash of obese Americans "diagnosed" with diabetes.

That usage is not healthy. "Diagnosed" is a transitive verb and should be applied to the object of the diagnosis—the disease—not the patient, as in "The doctor diagnosed a brain tumor." Adding the preposition "with" to make it passive is not a cure.

Somewhat surprisingly, dictionaries have not kept up with people's usage. No major dictionary lists as its first choice the use of "diagnosed" to apply to the patient. Only the *New American Oxford Dictionary* comes right out and endorses it, as a secondary meaning: "(usu. be diagnosed) identify the nature of the medical condition of (someone): she was finally diagnosed as having epilepsy/20,000 men are diagnosed with skin cancer every year."

Perhaps the best prescription is from *Garner's Modern American Usage*: "This idiomatic syntax is too common to be called erroneous, though a careful writer will still avoid it in formal writing."

One way to avoid it is to say, "The doctor gave her a diagnosis of breast cancer." If that sounds too clunky, well, cut out "diagnose" entirely and write: "The doctor told her she has breast cancer."

—Merrill Perlman

WINNERS ANNOUNCED

BARLETT & STEELE AWARDS

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BUSINESSWEEK
"PRISONERS OF DEBT"

RUNNER-UP
THE SEATTLE TIMES
"THE FAVOR FACTORY"

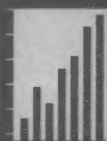


"Prisoners of Debt," a series by *BusinessWeek*'s Brian Grow, Robert Berner, Keith Epstein and Geri Smith, received the \$5,000 first-place award. "The Favor Factory" by *The Seattle Times*' David Heath and Hal Bernton was awarded the \$2,000 second-place prize.

These awards sponsored by the Reynolds Center are named for the celebrated investigative business journalism team of Don Barlett and Jim Steele, which has received two Pulitzer Prizes and numerous other national honors. Judging of the awards is based on that duo's admonition to break new ground and "tell me something I don't know."

Honorable mentions (in alphabetical order) in the 2008 awards went to:

- *Bloomberg Markets*, "Toxic Debt" by David Evans and Richard Tomlinson.
- *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, "Chemical Fallout" by Susanne Rust, Meg Kissinger and Cary Spivak.
- *The New York Times*, "Golden Opportunities" by Charles Duhigg.
- *The Wall Street Journal*, "U.S. Investors Face an Age of Murky Pricing" by Susan Pulliam, Randall Smith and Michael Siconolfi.



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- Brain and cognitive sciences
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- Stem cells and cloning
- Weapons of mass destruction
- The origin of matter and energy
- HIV and AIDS
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LAUREL

to the **Rocky Mountain News** for uncovering a systemic effort by a federal Department of Labor program to deny compensation to former nuclear-arms workers

sickened by exposure to radiation.

In January 2008, the Denver-based *Rocky* launched a six-month investigation to examine why thousands of sick workers were experiencing extensive delays and rejections when they sought compensation from a federal program created to serve them. In the three-part series that resulted, **DEADLY DENIAL**, published in July, reporter Laura Frank, with the help of project editor Jim Trotter and reporter Ann Imse, showed that the "Labor Department has delayed the cases of sick nuclear weapons workers or their survivors across the nation by giving misleading information, withholding records essential to their cases, failing to inform them of alternative paths to aid, repeatedly claiming to have lost evidence sent by ill workers and making requirements for compensation impossibly high." Throughout the series, the *Rocky* hammered home a central point: these problems were not a result of bureaucratic bungling, but rather a conscious plan by the Labor Department to avoid paying claims.

Frank wrote her first story about the plight of the nuclear workers in 1997 as a reporter at *The Tennessean*. Former employees at plants where uranium was processed into bomb fuel began developing a variety of cancers and other diseases that their doctors couldn't explain. At first, the government denied that radioactive materials and related toxic substances were making the workers sick. Then in 2000, in a surprising about-face, the Clinton administration created the Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation Program within the Department of Energy to pay medical bills and provide compensation.

The Labor Department took control of the program in 2004, the same year that Frank came to work at the *Rocky*. In 2007, she reconnected with the story after hearing that many sick workers from the nearby Rocky Flats bomb-production facility had had their claims denied by the compensation program, even though Department of Labor officials had said the effort was succeeding and thousands of workers had received compensation. "I remember thinking very clearly, 'Is there something systemically wrong or is this just a very complex program running into run-of-the-mill bureaucratic problems?'" Frank says. "I didn't know which it was."

To answer the question, Frank interviewed hundreds of ill workers around the country and reviewed stacks of documents from the departments of Labor and Health. In the

process, she discovered one former employee, a worker from an Iowa plant, who had his claim rejected because he has prostate cancer, an illness that was on a so-called no-pay list that had been compiled by the Labor Department to identify conditions that it said were not caused by radiation. Frank investigated the list's origins, and learned that its creation coincided with an effort by the Bush White House to control the growing cost of the compensation program.

At this point, Frank says, she started to "look at everything in a different light." She didn't see the timing as happenstance, but rather as a hint that the Labor Department may have begun intentionally rejecting legitimate claims.

Next, Frank created a timeline of various decisions made by the Labor Department and compared those to the medical and correspondence records of the workers whose claims had been denied. The comparison indicated a system that pitted sick and dying workers, or their families, against a bureaucracy set on saying no. For example, the department required workers to report how much radiation they were exposed to at their jobs. But the classified nature of the work made this impossible, leaving workers without access to materials that could help prove their cases.

Frank tried for two months to get department officials to grant her an interview or respond to the paper's findings. In the final days before deadline, a response was repeatedly promised but never arrived. In the end, *Rocky* editor John Temple decided to publish the series without comment. "Our experience became indicative of what the workers had gone through and, to me, reinforced the unreliability of the bureaucracy," Temple says. "To me, it revealed how screwed up that agency is."

As a result of Frank's series, several U.S. senators and congressmen introduced legislation to expedite worker claims. By late September, a group of seven senators had come together to call for an investigation by the Government Accountability Office into the department's handling of the claims. In the meantime, many of the people Frank interviewed are growing sicker, still waiting for reimbursement.

The *Rocky* received dozens of letters and calls from other sick workers around the country, telling stories so similar to the ones Frank wrote about, that she is confident that her sources are not statistical anomalies, but representative of a corrupt system.

In mid-September, Frank finally got a response from Labor Department officials: a stern admonishment in an e-mail that blasted her for having "completely inaccurate" information in one of the graphics that accompanied her articles. Its lone substantive gripe? The graphic included a Department of Labor seal that, the letter suggested, made it appear to be an official department document when it was not. **CJR**

Music Lessons

What journalists could learn from Kid Rock, Lil Wayne, and Bon Iver

HE TAKES THE STAGE CLAD IN A BLACK TURTLENECK. HIS FAMOUS LINE IS, "Green is the new red, white, and blue." Tonight, and other nights, he is paid tens of thousands of dollars to perform. He spent a year touring America, adding China for good measure. When he returns home, he lands in an 11,400-square-foot house.

He's not a rock star, although his life resembles that of one. He is Thomas Friedman, author, newspaperman, star commenter. His ascent is part and parcel of a period in which newspapers may train even their lowliest reporters for media appearances. Journalists these days grin under pancake make-up, speak in emphatic and punchy sentences, and videotape themselves for YouTube. In short, they sometimes succeed when they tear a page from performers' scripts.

It got me thinking: Could one ailing media industry—music—teach another ailing media industry—journalism—a thing or two about survival?

I think the most resourceful strategies of musicians can help us. The first thing that writers might copy from musicians—even more than they do already—could be called the Free Culture Method. In music, one prong of that is mixtape giveaways. Despite recent miseries in the music business, Lil Wayne, the rap artist, sold more copies of his CD in one week than anyone this year, having built an audience by sending free mixtapes into the ether. Mixtapes, at least these days, are pressed CDs or downloads containing demos or raw mixes of tracks, as well as collaborations. Lil Wayne's mixtape method is the musical equivalent of writers who give away original material on their blogs, writers like Alan Sepinwall, otherwise just another television reviewer at a mid-size metro—*The Star-Ledger* in Newark. Sepinwall writes an elaborate, trenchant, and heavily commented-upon blog (check out his 2,023-word analysis of the television show *Mad Men*'s "Maidenform" episode) in addition to his print column, and the blog has extended his reach. Or consider Andrew Revkin's sharp *New York Times* blog and vlog on global warming, through which Revkin made himself a brand.

For Lil Wayne, says Scott Plagenhoef, editor in chief of Pitchfork, the taste-making Web 2.0 music site, "it was like, 'If the mixtape stuff is so good, imagine how good the *real* product will be.' He's given so freely to his audience, they feel very free to give back with their dollars." Another variation on the Free Culture Method: musicians who figure out how to build an audience by appealing to their desire for the rough-hewn and personal, the mark of the human hand in a mechanical world. A good example of this is Bon Iver, a recent indie-music success story. The label rep tells me their story: Bon Iver's Justin Vernon started without a label, a manager, or a girlfriend. He locked himself in a hunting cabin

in rural Wisconsin for three months and finished his magnum opus, and then put it on a Web site, streaming for free. It was a rusty, dusty, snowy, and angrily melancholy record. His many performances were incredibly spare and earnest. Fans gathered and downloaded his lovelorn music via Virb, a new social-network site. His friend did the artwork, and Vernon pressed five hundred CDs himself, giving them away to Pitchfork and to not-so-major press outlets. Soon, critics raved and, ultimately, his work was distributed online and through small music stores. Vernon was not made by EMI or Atlantic but by music bloggers on HypeMachine and others. He sold fifty thousand copies on a small record label, mostly through word of mouth.

Part of what he did—that the new tribe of unmoored bloggers and journalists can do as well—is create a community based on personal authenticity, a reason that your readers must support your work by buying your book or going to hear you speak. Part of the Free Culture Method is cultivating an audience around your giveaway content. The indie band Deerhoof, for example, regularly blogs and posts covers and works-in-progress on its site, and also posts its monthly "top ten" tracks from other groups. Of course, in nonfiction, there are plenty of writers who start out as bloggers and transform themselves into



Human hand Bon Iver's Justin Vernon built an audience with authenticity.

authors, succeeding by way of the Free Culture Method.

"Both journalists and musicians must spend a phenomenal amount of time nowadays maintaining a 360-degree cross-media relationship with their fan base," says Aram Sinnreich, a visiting professor of media studies at New York University and a bassist in the band Brave New Girl. "Like a band on tour, journalists need to e-mail and Facebook readers, to stay involved with them on a daily basis, to respond to their comments, to give more than just lip service." By being accessible to readers—instead of explaining "what the song meant," explaining "what that article meant"—journalists can deepen reader loyalty to their work. As Jonathan Karp, publisher of Twelve Books, an inventive new imprint that only puts out twelve titles a year, says, writing nonfiction books these days is "a form of conversation with your readers. Writers gotta talk back."

In fact, Twelve Books is a good exam-

ple of a second strategy—Going Micro—a method that has worked relatively well of late in the music industry and, to a lesser extent, has worked well in book publishing and online newspapers. Another good example of this is Merge Records, an indie label in North Carolina, which has done extremely well cultivating chart-topping acts like Arcade Fire and Spoon. Merge is a more manageable mode, than the larger labels, in part because a musical monoculture has been replaced by microcultures. The company is perceived as curatorial and selective, rather than sprawling. Such small and strenuously tasteful companies are positioned to cater to niches and special interests.

And as Jamie Proctor, at the indie label Thrill Jockey, puts it, "It's easier to change your business model and methods when you have a company of six or eight people rather than six hundred or eight hundred." The bigger a label is, meanwhile, the harder it is for it to

survive in the digital era because its functions are being picked off by fans "distributing" music themselves, artists selling their own music, and bookers and managers organizing and profiting from tours and performances. Similarly, smaller publications, from Grist—the green-issues news Web site that correctly dubs itself "gloom and doom with a sense of humor"—to online local newspapers and granular news sites like Cityblock and fivethirtyeight, the electoral-projections Web site, are little doors to the future of media. These sites have a total commitment to their beats; they explore them with an élan and a thoroughness that larger publications don't usually manage.

The third approach is what I call the Atavist Strategy. It's used by successful musical throwbacks like Kid Rock, who, before October, didn't offer his music as digital content. His new CD *Rock n Roll Jesus* went platinum in May—without the help of downloads. As Kid Rock's

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— 2007 WINNERS —

Brian Grow, Robert Berner and Keith Epstein, *BusinessWeek*, for exposing abusive credit practices by banks and financial firms targeting the poor.

Dahr Jamail for reporting on his blog and in various publications on the brutal impact of the Iraq War on ordinary Iraqi citizens.

Helen Benedict, *Saion.com*, for highlighting the shocking prevalence of sexual abuse of US women soldiers in Iraq.

Jeremy Scahill, *The Nation* and *Democracy Now*, for exposing the growing role of Blackwater Worldwide's mercenary soldiers in Iraq.

Jarrett Murphy, *City Limits Investigates*, for spotlighting how NYC's bail system inflicts extraordinary hardships on low-income people.

Matt O'Brien and **Ray Chavez** (photographer), *The Daily Review* (Hayward, Cal.), for portraying the dangerous journey of Mayans from Guatemala to work in the U.S.

Marc Simont for "Cartooning With a Conscience" in more than 50 years of cartoons to the editor of the *Lakeville (CT) Journal*.

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publicist, Nick Stern, puts it, "Music labels are either conning people to pay for something they could get for free, acting like bottled-water companies, or they appeal to an older demo, like Kid Rock, to people who are not used to going on the Internet, at least for now, but do go to Wal-Mart." The media equivalent of the Atavist Strategy? The *Wall Street Journal's* subscription-only online presence, with its firewall. But tread carefully. You have to be very clever to get rich off being backward.

Another part of the Atavist Strategy is musicians getting by not on their recordings, but on live performances. Once, a band that was eternally on tour struggled daily with obscurity and/or poverty; now it's par for the course for even the biggest artists. Similarly, authors these days try to cash in with speaking engagements. Like musicians, they want to build their brand first, as opposed to that of their company or label. Some younger journalists have learned these lessons already, and are benefiting from them (though one I spoke to compared the process to speed dating). Jennifer 8. Lee, a thirty-two-year-old *New York Times* reporter who recently published a nonfiction book entitled *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles*, tells me she has done fifty talks in support of her book in the last half year.

MUSIC AND JOURNALISM WERE ONCE lodestones of both daily life and collective experience—the newspaper, unfolded and read on the way to work on the subway or commuter rail; the LP, spun in bedrooms and dens, or the cassette tape played in the car those nights when everyone sang along, back when everyone knew the lyrics. Those lodestones are going or gone. The music industry and the news industry were both once the foundation of mass culture. That monoculture is shattering, for better or worse, into "minor cultures"—many different and splintered communities, served by many different sources of music and news.

Both industries have lost buyers. Yet both have gained audiences in the last five years. While there was a total CD sales decline of 15 percent between 2006 and 2007, the sale of digital tracks increased by 48.5 percent in that same period, and God knows how many il-

legal downloads there were. And while people may not be buying newspapers in droves, many more are reading them online. The print circulation of the daily *New York Times*, for example, is down to just over a million, but online it has risen to around 13 million unique visitors each month. Both industries, and the individuals who work in them, are looking for ways to draw income and support from those expanding audiences, and maybe journalists can look to musicians for a move or two.

There is one place, though, where the similarities between reporters (i.e. shy egotists) and rock musicians fall apart. Bands have always engaged in adamant self-branding—think David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust or Madonna's many incarnations. Journalists, on the other hand, have been more diffident and willfully depersonalized. With the exception of New Journalists—those ancestors to the bloggers and the multiplatform authors of today—journalists aren't usually full-on peacocks. They put the story before themselves and attempt to render others as if with invisible hands. Journalists have been taught to erase the individual—remember the Unbiased Media ideal that was hammered into us as young journalists? (We are also unlikely to go on "reunion tours" during which we discuss our long-forgotten "hit" features.)

Yet some journalists certainly know how to promote their names and personae, and their bylines appear to have multiplied. Images of their faces bob seductively beside their names. In the Too Much Information Age, journalists' biographies—once not supposed to intrude on the story—have moved toward the center of it. And for better or worse, all of us in all the culture industries not only have to go back to the pre-modern storytelling mode, but also learn how to give our work away without getting ripped off and how to have fervid e-mail relationships with our audiences. We must also at least pretend we have interesting personalities and act like we are a little larger than life. **CJR**

ALISSA QUART is a columnist and contributing editor to the *Columbia Journalism Review*, and the author of two books, *Branded* and *Hothouse Kids*.

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False Readings

How the Gross Domestic Product leads us astray

IT IS 7:30 A.M. IN WASHINGTON AND A BEVY OF REPORTERS FILES INTO THE Department of Commerce, which is kitty-corner from the Treasury. They take their seats, and the door is locked behind them. For the next hour, no one can go in or out. An official from the Bureau of Economic Analysis distributes the latest GDP estimates—that's Gross Domestic Product—and answers questions. Then the reporters get an hour to file their stories.

This monthly event is called the lock-up, and in most times it is a metronome in the cycle of Washington economic news. The GDP is essentially a tally of the money that Americans spend over a given period. In a commercial culture, such transactions are alpha and omega, and the GDP updates are like utterances from the oracle. Amid the market turmoil that besets the country as I write, the GDP will loom as a harbinger of good times or bad.

The resulting stories have a strange combination of opacity and authority, a journalistic equivalent of the Latin mass. The specifics vary, but the script remains pretty much the same. There are upticks and downturns. Growth is robust or anemic, exceeds expectations or disappoints them. That is the story, in its Mr. Potato Head variations, along with portentous comment from those ubiquitous Wall Street analysts whose institutional interest in spinning the numbers somehow goes without mention.

Critics have noted how adjustments to the GDP over the years have tended to make the figure more propitious. But my concern here is more basic. Beneath the fixation upon GDP is a single assumption: an increase in spending will be cause for celebration. "Sluggish" growth, by contrast, will provoke alarms and demands for policy purgatives and stimulants to get things moving again. This is the master narrative, and it makes no difference what the "growth" consists of, or who gets what portion of it, or the effects. Reporters embrace an abstraction as economic reality. *Product*—as in gross domestic—becomes a theological concept, a metaphysical absolute, rather than a statistical lump that has to be broken down into specifics before anyone can say what is going on.

Thus the news accounts on May 1 of this year of the Commerce Department release the previous day. The economy "continued to stagnate," *The New York Times* reported. Consumer spending was up just 1 percent over the previous quarter, and in the prevailing script, this must mean that life is getting worse.

But wait—what is this? On another page of the same edition, the *Times* reported that American mothers are breastfeeding more and using formula less. This is good news for babies. By most accounts, mom is the best source of suste-

nance, emotionally as well as physically. Yet there is a problem. Americans spend somewhere between two and three billion dollars a year on infant formula. To the economic mind—the one embedded in the GDP—a drop in sales for formula makers could mean "the economy" is in decline. *MOTHERS' MILK THREATENS ECONOMY*—newspapers wouldn't run such a headline. But it's implicit in their take on "growth."

The disconnect between "the economy" of statistical abstraction and the one that people actually live in is a recurring if unrecognized theme. On the front page of the *Times* that same day, alongside the GDP story, was another on how Latino immigrants in the U.S. were remitting less money to their families back home. The money not sent will boost spending here, but that just means more poverty in Mexico. The *Times* ran another story that day on how Asian Americans were buying rice in large quantities, for fear of looming shortages. The quarterly GDP figures will get a boost, but it's not the cheery prospect that such upticks typically suggest. And so it goes. In recent months there have been reports of Americans growing more food in their gardens, walking more, and burning less gas. All of these send the official economy downward, even as Americans often experience them as gains in well-being.

By the same token, expenditures for credit-card interest, obesity medications, gambling, disaster cleanups, even price gouging and fraud are included in the tally of what the media report as economic advance. Car crashes, cancer, and divorce must be economically auspicious because they cost so much. *BusinessWeek* reported recently that Americans pay at least \$1 billion a year through an illegal medical-billing practice called "balance billing" that makes them pay what insurance companies don't. If you are among those so gouged, then congratulations. You are helping the economy to "stagnate" a little less.

SUPPOSE THE MAYOR OF YOUR CITY held a press conference tomorrow and announced that "activity" on the city streets was up 5 percent over the previous year. Most reporters probably would have questions. Exactly what was this

"activity"? Was it drug dealing and prostitution? Drive-by shootings? Or was it block parties, farmers' markets, neighborhood watch efforts, and the like? Unless you know what the "activity" is, in concrete terms, you cannot begin to say whether more of it has been good or not. The point seems obvious. Yet somehow, the subject of the economy casts a spell over the reportorial mind. Reporters glom onto the worldview of economists, who want to be esteemed as scientists, and so deal in abstract categories upon which they can hang their math.

This is not an arcane Beltway matter. GDP defines the economic storyline more than any other single thing. When people say that a measure will help "the economy" or hurt it, they mean it will make the GDP go up or down. We hear, for example, that proposals to halt climate change could jeopardize the economy. Does that mean that if people use mass transit more and so spend less on gas to sit in traffic and go nowhere (currently \$9 billion a year), it's bad?

This is where the logic leads. The passive acceptance of the underlying narrative can make reporters and commentators seem out of it. Last June 18, for example, a writer for *The Washington Post* wondered in print why Americans were so disgruntled. "According to most broad measures of how the economy is doing," he wrote, "it's not all that grim." The story proceeded to quote various economists in an effort to fathom this strange phenomenon—Americans who felt miserable when the economy, by the conventional measures, wasn't so bad.

Such reporters need to read the papers. The day the *Post* story appeared, *USA Today* reported that Kellogg's and General Mills were reducing the sizes of their cereal packages, so Americans would pay the same prices but get less for their money. Manufacturers of soap, paper towels, ice cream, and other products were doing the same.

The growth narrative is especially misleading in regard to what are called "developing countries" (a phrase that implicitly trucks it in). In such contexts, GDP is mainly just a measure of urbanization. Move from farm to city and you spend more cash for food and the like. Whether that's "progress" is another

matter. Consider my in-laws, who live on the outskirts of Manila. Three of their four children developed asthma a few years ago, probably because of the city's rancid air. They endured drug treatments for an entire year, which cost a fortune by Philippine standards. That's GDP. But it doesn't make them better off than their cousins on the farm who, though they spend less money, don't have trouble breathing.

There is a story lurking here that goes beyond the environmentalist critique. That version is based on the notion of "externalities"—which is to say, side effects from consumption otherwise assumed to be benign. Increasingly, however, people are dealing with what might be called "internalities" that are part and parcel of the consumption itself. The evidence is in the news daily. Take the *San Francisco Chronicle* last July 28. One story reports on a new form of protection from identity theft. Another is on efforts of parents to "push back" against their kids' cell-phone use; a third is on a new kind of power meter that restrains "power hogs"; yet another is an op-ed by a pediatrician who advocates cholesterol drugs... for kids.

All of these concern efforts either to restrain consumption or to remedy the ill effects of consumption already made—not on others but rather *upon the consumers themselves*. What the master narrative assumes is a happy jaunt up a mountain of more is turning into an iatrogenic spiral, in which spending—i.e. growth—begets problems that beget more spending, ad infinitum.

This would not have been a total surprise to Simon Kuznets, the economist who devised the national accounts that became the GDP. When Kuznets set up shop in the Commerce Department in 1933, he had no intention of developing a barometer of the economy. It was rather a planning tool to help the government cope with the Depression—and later to manage the production surge during World War II. In his report to Congress in 1934, Kuznets explained in detail why, as he put it, the "welfare of a nation can scarcely be inferred from a measurement of national income" such as he had constructed.

Politicians and the media made the inference anyway; and Kuznets, who

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went on to win a Nobel, watched with concern. Eventually, he came to view the fixation on GDP as fundamentally misguided—which is borderline heresy for an economist. It had become necessary, he said in a private memo, "to deny from the start that, *in and of itself*, the over-all rate of per capita growth means much" (emphasis his).

The media are not likely to pay heed any time soon. The grooves of the GDP narrative run deep. Reporters would feel adrift without it. But then, it isn't necessary to abandon the number entirely. The GDP does serve a purpose. Bankers and corporate planners need to know how much expenditure is sloshing around in the economy. The government needs to project tax revenues.

The GDP is a financial story, something for the back of the business section. It just isn't the gauge of economic performance that the media have made it. The answer is simply to do what reporters are supposed to do, and look at life in the concrete. They need to shed the abstractions of economics—growth, product, consumption, and the rest—with their embedded metaphysic, and look at life with empirical eyes.

If kids are spending more on junk food, and then their parents are spending more on obesity meds as a result, don't just add the two together and call it "economic recovery," or "advance" simply because the GDP does. Don't serve as stenographers for advocates who say measures to combat climate change will "hurt the economy," if what they mean is expenditures for treating asthma in young children—among other things—will go down. This is on top of the need to look at the *distribution* of the nation's wealth, which the GDP ignores as well.

Kuznets saw the challenge. "Goals for 'more' growth should specify more growth of what and for what," he wrote. It's a good point to keep in mind amid efforts to restore the nation's economic health. The question isn't just how much the economy is growing. Equally important is exactly what is growing, and to what effect. **CJR**

JONATHAN ROWE is a contributing editor to the Washington Monthly and YES! magazine. The Glaser Progress Foundation provided support for this article.

Pushback

Fed-up newsrooms want a voice in their future

WHEN HER *CONTRA COSTA TIMES* COLLEAGUES COMPARED HER UNION ORGANIZING efforts to those of Norma Rae, Sara Steffens rented the 1979 Martin Ritt film—and was disconcerted to discover that the feisty textile worker immortalized by Sally Field lost her job. “I remember thinking, ‘I hope that doesn’t mean I’m going to lose my job,’” Steffens said late last summer.

On June 13, editorial workers at the Bay Area News Group—East Bay, a group of nine MediaNews properties that includes the *Contra Costa Times*, voted to be represented by The Newspaper Guild—Communication Workers of America. It was the guild’s largest U.S. organizing win since the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* some two decades ago, according to Eric Geist, the union’s administrative director.

But victory came with a twist. Two weeks later, management announced a 13 percent reduction in the unionized workforce—and the thirty-six-year-old Steffens, an award-winning poverty and social-services reporter, was among the twenty-nine laid off.

The guild has filed an unfair-labor-practices charge with the National Labor Relations Board on behalf of Steffens and two other laid-off reporters involved in the organizing drive. The company, not surprisingly, denies any wrongdoing. “The decision on the RIF [reduction in force] had nothing to do with the people—it was the positions that people held and the elimination of redundancies,” says Marshall Anstandig, a senior vice president and general counsel for MediaNews’s California News Group. Nor, says Anstandig, was Steffens specifically targeted. “Believe me, she’s not that important.”

Ouch.

Whatever the legal outcome, the *Contra Costa* case illustrates the rising frustration—for both labor and management—in today’s shrinking newsrooms. It also hints at the obstacles confronted by rank-and-file editorial employees fed up with cost cutting and the erosion of newspaper quality and eager for more constructive change.

Over the summer, protest was clearly in the air, notably at Sam Zell’s privately held Tribune Company. Massive job losses—135 in the *Los Angeles Times* newsroom alone—inspired satirical blogs such as Tell Zell and The Amazing Shrinking *Orlando Sentinel*, a protest rally at *The Baltimore Sun*, and an uptick of interest in unionization. In September, a group of former and current *Los Angeles Times* reporters filed a federal class action suit against Zell, claiming that he breached his fiduciary duty to employees in the Tribune’s Employee Stock Ownership Plan. Throughout the industry, workers have been arguing for a role in managing the transition to

the digital age. But as job security evaporates and the economic status of journalists continues to deteriorate, will most of them stick around long enough for their voices to be heard?

For the moment, anyway, the anger in newsrooms is palpable. “Morons are now in charge of one of America’s great newspapers,” the anonymous *Los Angeles Times* employee who writes Tell Zell told me in an e-mail. The so-called Ink-Stained Retch has publicized newsroom organizing efforts by both the guild and the Teamsters. He also has started an online petition requesting the addition of an employee and a reader representative to the Tribune board of directors. But his main weapons are rant and ridicule, aimed at irritating Zell into selling the newspaper. “Every little thing counts, like sand grains in an oyster,” he says. “Not sure if that metaphor works, really, but the pearl comes when Sam Zell gets out.”

Meanwhile, Lesley Phillips, a guild organizer, has taken on what she calls the “formidable task” of trying to organize the *Times* newsroom. Once dubbed the “velvet coffin” for its high salaries and generous perks, the paper has been shaken by staff reductions and the departure of a string of editors and publishers. “All of a sudden,” says Phillips, “the velvet coffin wasn’t so comfortable anymore.”

About “seventeen or eighteen” *Times* staff members attended a union meeting in Los Angeles this summer, says the guild’s Eric Geist. Geist and Phillips made clear that a union contract would not necessarily prevent future job cuts. “That stops a lot of our organizing in its tracks,” Geist says. “People ask, ‘Why should I join the Newspaper Guild if you can’t stop the layoffs or the buyouts?’” Geist’s response is that the union, in addition to its traditional advocacy for better pay and benefits, can help companies adapt to the new world order.

Bernie Lunzer, president of the guild, sees the union’s role as evolving in a more cooperative direction. The guild wants both training and “legitimate input into what the products are going forward,” Lunzer says. But management has been slow to capitalize on the expertise of “frontline workers,” he says, and has been “stuck in their hierarchies

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and old-world management systems." As managers focus on cutting costs, it's increasingly left to workers to point out what's being lost.

Preserving quality was a rallying cry this summer at *The Baltimore Sun*, the lone guild paper in Tribune, where sixty newsroom jobs (and a hundred companywide) were eliminated. The departures were mourned at a July union protest in front of the newspaper that featured one hundred black chairs with pink slips attached to them and chants of "Sell, Zell." For Lynn Anderson, a forty-year-old former *Sun* reporter who co-chaired the Baltimore guild unit, the protest was an emotional high-water mark. "We were sad," she says, "but making a public statement together made us feel strong. For that hour, I think we felt very determined. And I think that determination has carried over."

Anderson, though, decided she had had enough. She took a buyout and signed on with a public-relations firm. "This is a window where a lot of journalists are saying, 'We've got to get out of the industry for a while,'" she says. "This is the first time I've seen people under thirty taking a buyout."

In Philadelphia, after two contentious years, there were signs of a tentative, and perhaps temporary, management-labor rapprochement. At the company's request, the guild, along with a majority of the blue-collar unions, voted to defer the \$25-a-week raises that were due to kick in September 1. Philadelphia Media Holdings, the private, debt-ridden company that owns *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Daily News*, still was planning to trim "as many as forty" guild members, says Diane Mastrull, an *Inquirer* reporter who chairs the *Inquirer/Daily News* bargaining unit. Those cuts were to flow mainly from the consolidation of the two papers' copy desks and photo departments. But Mastrull says she told company officials that she "would not consider even going to our members and asking them to defer the raise if I was not assured that there would be management cuts." She says she got a commitment for the dismissal of "up to fifteen managers" in the two newsrooms.

Mark Frisby, whose titles include executive vice president of Philadelphia

Media Holdings and publisher of the *Daily News*, said in an interview that there was no explicit quid pro quo. But he says he did tell the guild that seventy-four "independents" (managers and supervisors) had been let go companywide over the past two years, and that such cuts would continue. With advertising revenues already down 18 percent this year, the exact number of management layoffs is "a moving target," he says. Though the company plans to slash expenses by \$50 million this year, Frisby says ominously, "we can't take expenses out as quickly as the revenue is going away."

The guild is optimistic that the payoff for playing nice this time around will be a voice in the company's future. Says Mastrull: "I said to them, 'It appears our members have better ideas than you guys have. We want to begin working with you to find ways we can come up with new products, better ways to grow revenue here, so we're not constantly having to look at ways to just cut and cut and cut.'"

Frisby says he's open to the guild's ideas. But don't look for the cuts—ongoing since at least the early 1990s, under Knight-Ridder—to stop anytime soon. The current contract expires next September, and Frisby says the company will be seeking yet "more efficiencies" in its next contract.

"If you look at the competition—*Philadelphia Magazine*, *Philadelphia Weekly*—any of those reporters are probably making twenty grand less than these reporters here," says Frisby. "We're working every day to make sure that the doors stay open. And, quite frankly, raises are pretty low on my list of priorities right now. The main focus is surviving during these tough economic times."

Daily newspaper journalists may eagerly embrace new technologies and the multitasking that they require. They may seek accommodation with management or protest managerial incompetence, fight for unions or make do without them. But for the foreseeable future, they also need to accept the grim reality of their own declining economic clout. **CJR**

JULIA M. KLEIN is a contributing editor to the *Columbia Journalism Review*.

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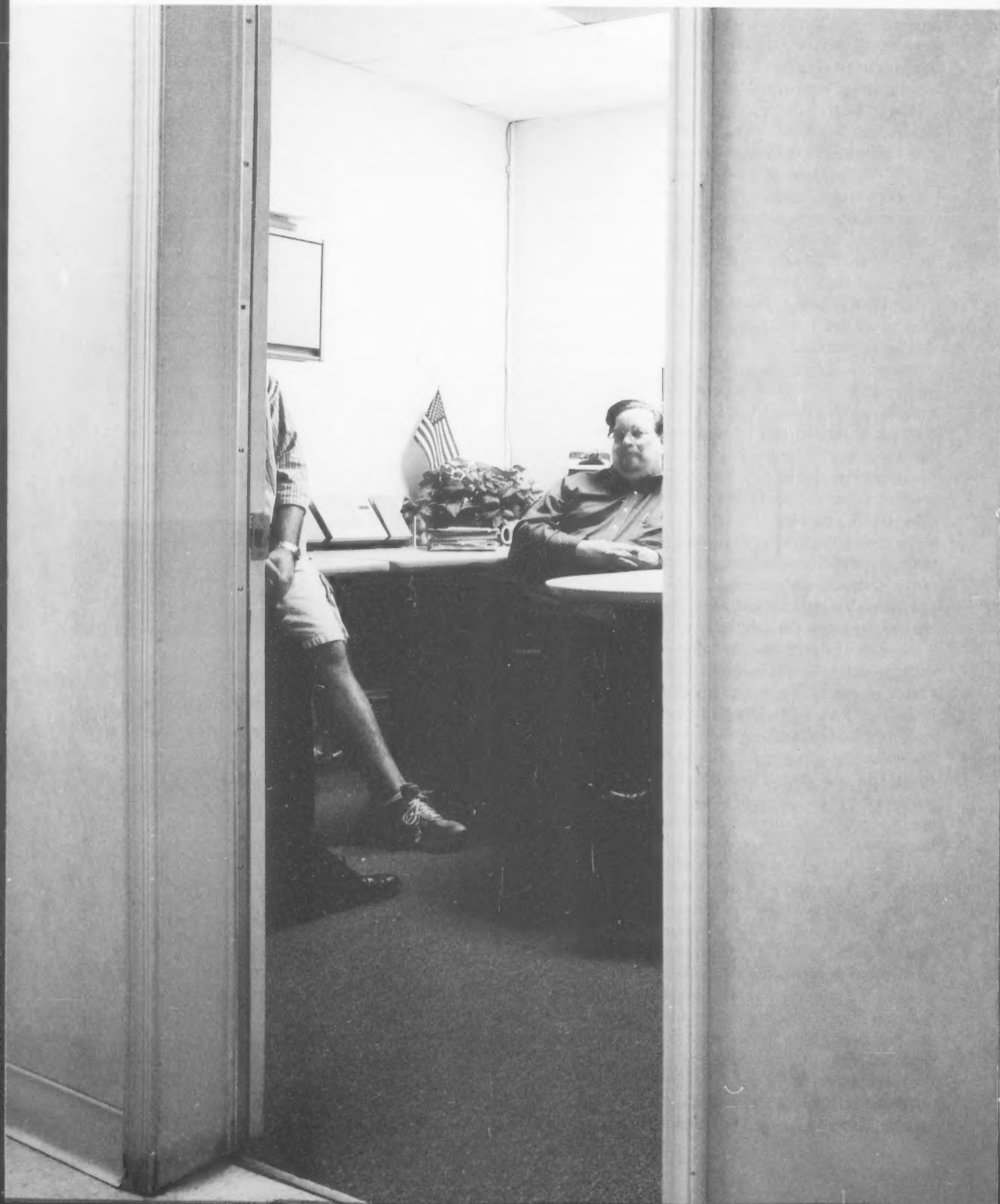
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Overload!

Journalism's battle for relevance in an age of too much information

BY BREE NORDENSON

In 2007, as part of the third round of strategic planning for its digital transformation, The Associated Press decided to do something a little different. It hired a research company called Context to conduct an in-depth study of young-adult news consumption around the world. Jim Kennedy, the AP's director of strategic planning, initially agreed to the project because he thought it would make for a "fun and entertaining" presentation at the

annual meeting. It turned out to be more than that; the AP believed that the results held fundamental implications for the role of the news media in the digital age. Chief among the findings was that many young consumers craved more in-depth news but were unable or unwilling to get it. "The abundance of news and ubiquity of choice do not necessarily translate into a better news environment for consumers," concluded the researchers in their final report. "Participants in this study showed signs of news fatigue; that is, they appeared debilitated by information overload and unsatisfying news experiences.... Ultimately news fatigue brought many of the participants to a learned helplessness response. The more overwhelmed or unsatisfied they were, the less effort they were willing to put in."

The idea that news consumers, even young ones, are overloaded should hardly come as a surprise. The information age is defined by output: we produce far more information

than we can possibly manage, let alone absorb. Before the digital era, information was limited by our means to contain it. Publishing was restricted by paper and delivery costs; broadcasting was circumscribed by available frequencies and airtime. The Internet, on the other hand, has unlimited capacity at near-zero cost. There are more than 70 million blogs and 150 million Web sites today—a number that is expanding at a rate of approximately ten thousand an hour. Two hundred and ten billion e-mails are sent each day. Say goodbye to the gigabyte and hello to the exabyte, five of which are worth 37,000 Libraries of Congress. In 2006 alone, the world produced 161 exabytes of digital data, the equivalent of three million times the information contained in all the books ever written. By 2010, it is estimated that this number will increase to 988. Pick your metaphor: we're drowning, buried, snowed under.

The information age's effect on news production and consumption has been profound. For all its benefits—increased transparency, accessibility, and democratization—the Internet has upended the business model of advertising-supported journalism. This, in turn, has led news outlets to a ferocious focus on profitability. Over the past decade, they have cut staff, closed bureaus, and shrunk the newshole. Yet despite these reductions, the average citizen is unlikely to complain of a lack of news. Anyone with access to the Internet has thousands of free news sources at his fingertips. In a matter of seconds, we can browse *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*, *Newsweek* and *The Economist*, CNN and the BBC.

News is part of the atmosphere now, as pervasive—and in some ways as invasive—as advertising. It finds us in airport lounges and taxicabs, on our smart phones and PDAs, through e-mail providers and Internet search engines. Much of the time, it arrives unpackaged: headlines, updates, and articles are snatched from their original sources—often as soon as they're published—and excerpted or aggregated on blogs, portals, social-networking sites, RSS readers, and customizable homepages like My MSN, My Yahoo, myAOL, and iGoogle. These days, news comes at us in a flood of unrelated snippets. As Clay Shirky, author of *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations*, explains, "The economic logic of the age is unbundling." But information without context is meaningless. It is incapable of informing and can make consumers feel lost. As the AP noted in its research report, "The irony in news fatigue is that these



consumers felt helpless to change their news consumption at a time when they have more control and choice than ever before. When the news wore them down, participants in the study showed a tendency to passively receive versus actively seek news."

There has always been a large swath of the population that is not interested in news, of course, just as there has always been a portion that actively seeks it out. What's interesting about the current environment is that despite an enormous increase in available news and information, the American public is no better informed now than it has been during less information-rich times. "The basic pattern from the forties to today is that the amount of information that people have and their knowledge about politics is no worse or no better than it's been over that sixty-year period," explains Michael X. Delli Carpini, dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. For example, a

To win the war for our attention, news organizations must make themselves indispensable by producing journalism that helps make sense of the flood of information that inundates us all.

2007 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press found that 69 percent of Americans could correctly name the vice president, only a slight decrease from the 74 percent who could in 1989.

This phenomenon can be partially explained by our tendency to become passive in the face of too much information. It can also be attributed to the fact that the sheer number of specialized publications, the preponderance of television channels, the wide array of entertainment options, and the personalization and customization encouraged by digital technologies have made it far easier to avoid public-affairs content. "As choice goes up, people who are motivated to be politically informed take advantage of these choices, but people who are not move away from politics," explains Delli Carpini. "In the 1960s, if you wanted to watch television you were going to watch news. And today you can avoid news. So choice can be a mixed blessing."

Markus Prior writes in his book, *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections*, "Political information in the current media environment comes mostly to those who want it." In other words, in our supersaturated media environment, serendipitous exposure to political-affairs content is far less common than it used to be. Passive news consumers are less informed and less likely to become informed than ever before.

The tragedy of the news media in the information age is that in their struggle to find a financial foothold, they have neglected to look hard enough at the larger implications of the new information landscape—and more generally, of modern life. How do people process information? How has media saturation affected news consumption? What must the news media do in order to fulfill their critical role of informing the public, as well as survive? If they were to address these questions head on, many news outlets would discover that their actions thus far—to increase the volume and frequency of production, sometimes frantically and mindlessly—have only made things more difficult for the consumer.

While it is naïve to assume that news organizations will reduce their output—advertising dollars are involved, after all—they would be wise to be more mindful of the content they produce. The greatest hope for a healthy news media rests as much on their ability to filter and interpret information as it does on their ability to gather and disseminate it. If they make snippets and sound bites the priority, they will fail. Attention—our most precious resource—is in increasingly short supply. To win the war for our attention, news organizations must make themselves indispensable by producing journalism that helps make sense of the flood of information that inundates us all.

The Limits of Human Attention

Ours is a culture of multitasking, of cramming as many activities as possible into as short a period of time as possible. We drive and talk on our cell phones, check e-mail

during meetings and presentations, eat dinner while watching TV. In part, says Maggie Jackson, author of *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age*, such multitasking "is part of a wider value system that venerates speed, frenetic activity, hyper-mobility, etcetera, as the paths to success. That's why we're willing to drive like drunks or work in frenzied ways, although it literally might kill us."

Many young people multitask to the extreme, particularly when it comes to media consumption. I've witnessed my twenty-two-year-old brother watch television while talking on the phone, IMing with several friends, composing an e-mail, and updating his Facebook page. A widely cited 2006 study by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation found that 81 percent of young people engage in some form of media multitasking during a given week. But as cognitive psychologists have long known, human attention is quite limited. Despite our best efforts, when we try to do more than one thing at once, we are less efficient and more prone to error. This is because multitasking is actually a process of dividing attention, of toggling back and forth between tasks.

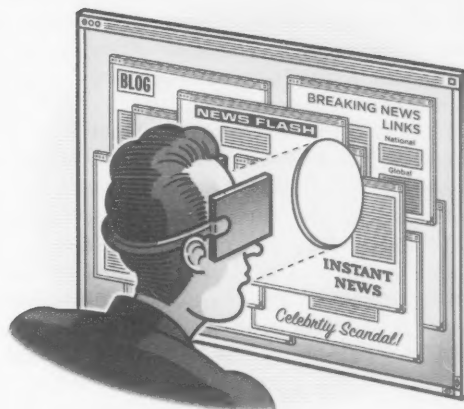
Acquiring new information requires particularly focused attention, which includes the ability to ignore distractions. In order to absorb the information contained in a CNN newscast, for example, we must not only direct our attention to the

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Surface Routines

How we read on the Web

BY MICHAEL MEYER



Overload—the amount people feel compelled to know combined with the volume of information they have to sift through in order to know it—is perhaps the largest factor in the increasingly distinct difference between how people read printed material and how they read online. Faced with the reality of having two eyes, one brain, and what the latest count estimates to be one trillion Web pages, many people forego immersive reading

of a handful of sites in order to skim the surface of thousands.

Although scores of academics study everything from how the number of hyperlinks on a page affects a user's heart rate to how parents read e-books to their children, the new type of reading that the Web either drives or enables is here to stay.

Newspaper designers and editors have begun their own attempts to determine Web readers' habits. It's part of an effort to make newspaper Web content fit the pace and shape of the Internet, divine reader tastes, and determine how to bring an audience to their sites and make them stay awhile. But honing Web strategies can also be a process of exclusion. It has been argued that long-form narrative, in-depth analysis, and other time-consuming examples of newspapers' strengths will not translate online—a rather dubious claim given the extremely varied Web content that exists today—but there is also little doubt that the Web is rapidly evolving, and it is impossible to predict, with any certainty, where that evolution will ultimately take us.

In 1997, Jakob Nielsen, who would

later be dubbed “the guru of Web page usability” by *The New York Times*, posted an article on his site titled “How Users Read on the Web.” “They don’t,” Nielsen explained, citing research he had conducted that showed 79 percent of users scanned any new pages they came across, and only 16 percent read word by word. (The most common method of scanning looks something like an F-shape: two quick horizontal glances followed by a third down the left-hand side.) Nielsen is a usability expert whose goal is to narrow the gap between how people wish to use a Web page and how that Web page is actually designed. Toward that end, he works to streamline, perhaps even encourage, the behaviors that the Internet fosters, behaviors that some scientists and intellectuals fear herald a new, less desirable—even dangerous—kind of literacy.

Nielsen has found Web users to be engaged in a “ruthless pursuit” of bits of personally relevant information. To help them in this hunt, he recommends that articles written for the Web include “highlighted keywords,” “one idea per paragraph,” and “bulleted lists.” The mass of narratives and investigations

that fill a newspaper are, in the eyes of Nielsen's Web user, distractions to be hounded into the shadows.

Mario Garcia Jr., of the prolific newspaper design firm Garcia Media, has suggested that “a newspaper is something we read, but the Web is something we do.” I wondered out loud to Nielsen whether newspaper Web sites could draw an audience that is interested in something beyond all of this using and doing. “What about all the other things that people want or need?” I asked. “What about education?”

“The analogy with the school doesn't work because you've forced the children to attend,” he said. “You can't force anyone to go to a Web site so you have to make it more appealing to people. They'll still get what's good for them, but they won't get the things that are just a little bit good for them.”

Nielsen is equal parts realist and optimist, a result of his belief that communication mediums exist in a kind of socialist harmony where each does its part to fulfill a different task. (He's originally from Denmark, which may explain this.) He argues that we should accept the fact that the Web isn't well suited for deep reading or narrative, but says that's okay because other mediums, such as books or magazines, will always be there to fill that role. The flipside to his argument that different mediums needn't fear one another, however, is a rather narrow view of what any given medium is allowed to be—the content of a declining

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medium (print newspapers) can latch on to a surging one (the Web), but not without being completely integrated into the new form. If Nielsen is right, narrative storytelling and investigative journalism, at least as they exist in print newspapers, will be stranded without a business model to sustain them.

Maryanne Wolf, the director of the Center for Reading and Language Research at Tufts University, thinks, unlike

Does the Web drive people to a different kind of behavior, or does it simply allow unfettered access to the desires they already had?

Nielsen, that the more scattered style of Web reading is not simply picked up when one opens a browser and left behind when it is closed. Instead, Wolf has argued that reading, an unnatural act to which we've forced our brains to become accustomed, in effect requires us to create a new circuit within our brains. She said that what and how we read determine the function of that circuit, and that the methodical way in which we read a book is more than an example of how our brains perform feats such as logic—it is the model by which we became logical thinkers. In other words, deep thinking is nurtured by deep reading. Call it the you-are-what-you-eat theory of cerebral input, and Wolf believes that the size of the Web is driving people to frantic, chaotic gorging.

Nicholas Carr, who wrote the much-discussed *Atlantic* cover story last summer employing Wolf's findings, worries that the way a person reads on the Internet becomes the way he or she thinks in other facets of life—in a classroom, for example, or a voting booth. Elsewhere, Carr has suggested that the upshot of this shift could be the devolution of "contemplative man" to "flickering man,"

at which point only the most monastic Web reader would be able to focus on deep reading within a newspaper's Web site while the rest of the Internet idled in the background.

In 2007, the Poynter Institute released the results of EyeTrack '07, the largest effort yet to decipher how readers look at newspapers, both in print and online. Five hundred and eighty-two regular readers of newspapers in four cities were selected for the study. Those who got their news primarily from the Web were placed in one group, the holdouts from print in another. Cameras tracked their retinas as they went about what for them was still a common routine.

The results, heartening to most but perhaps disappointing to those who subscribe to the doomsday theory of online reading, described something markedly different from the scenario recommended by Nielsen and warned against by Wolf and Carr. Web readers were more selective in the stories they chose, but once they found what they wanted, they read a substantially higher percentage of text than their print counterparts—a result that was true across all story lengths. Rather than running from words, Web users tended to be more textually based, and typically entered a story through a headline rather than a photo.

In fact, all of the differences between the actions of print and online readers in EyeTrack could be far more easily attributed to the navigational structure of a news Web site than to the mysterious force of a new medium. The Web readers weren't frantic or scattered. Their heart rates, from all outward appearances, remained at a reasonable level. They were more or less just engaged members of a community, wearing cameras on their heads and turning pages with a button.

The study proved the obvious but still anxiously held point that the Web is capable of delivering stories of any length and complexity. It also proved that people are still interested in long-form content—even people who choose to read their news online. What the study was incapable of telling, however, is how a newspaper fits into the Web as a whole. Although participants were instructed to read as they would normally, the one

trillion Web pages outside of their newspapers' domain were off limits. No one stopped to check e-mail, cross-reference a favorite blog, or Google an interesting prompt or whim. Their banking had to be taken care of at another time. So, were the participants reading the newspaper on the Internet or simply on a screen?

The extent to which newspapers will be able to retain their most important traditional assets as they move online depends, in large part, on the answer to that question. Put another way: Does the Web drive people to a different type of behavior, or does it simply allow less fettered access to the desires they already had? If the former, the rules for attracting an audience would be completely different and any of the old ways of doing so that overlapped would be a matter of luck. It's easy these days to get caught up in the fear that everything of import will be lost in the transition from print to online, but it seems extreme to think that a new medium would force everyone to start from scratch. Even Nielsen, who contends that the Web does indeed drive user behaviors, bends his own rules by posting long and sometimes complexly worded arguments on his own Web site. He does this because he knows that his readers have a level of education and interest in his topics that will compel them to stay on the page long enough to hear him out. He senses the Web's power but doesn't let it exclude ideas he wants to communicate.

The Web may well have influence on human behavior. But it seems more helpful, for our purposes, to think of the equation as one of human behavior influencing the Internet—in which case, there is no reason that the impulses that compelled people to read the print newspaper couldn't exist in a similar way on the Internet. And those who fear the way people read (or behave or philosophize) online would do better to look to our education system and parenting, for example, to solve cultural inadequacies that the Internet, rather than encouraging, has simply made more apparent. **CJR**

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person talking, but also filter out the running headlines, news updates, and financial ticker on the lower part of the screen. Torkel Klingberg, a professor of cognitive neuroscience at Karolinska Institute in Sweden and author of *The Overflowing Brain*, puts it simply: "If we do not focus our attention on something, we will not remember it." In other words, attention is a critical component of learning.

Michael Posner, a researcher who has dedicated his career to studying attention and a professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Oregon, explains attention as a system of three networks—alerting, orienting, and executive. Alerting refers to the state of wakefulness necessary to attend to information, while orienting is the process by which we respond to stimuli, such as movement, sound, or noise. Executive attention is the highest-order network, the one that we have conscious control over. If we are trying to study for a test or read a novel, we use it to direct and maintain our focus, as well as to suppress our reaction to competing stimuli like the din of a nearby conversation or television.

The information-saturated environment that we live in is, unsurprisingly, extremely demanding of our attention. Modern life—both at work and at home—has become so information-rich that Edward Hallowell, a Boston-area psychiatrist, believes many of us suffer from what he calls an attention-deficit trait, a culturally induced form of attention-deficit disorder. As he pointed out in a 2005 interview with CNET News, "We've been able to overload manual labor. But never before have we so routinely been able to overload brain labor." According to Hallowell and other psychiatrists, all these competing inputs prevent us from assimilating information. "What your brain is best equipped to do is to think, to analyze, to dissect, and create," he explains. "And if you're simply responding to bits of stimulation, you won't ever go deep." Journalist John Lorinc noted as much in an elegant article on distraction in the April 2007 issue of *The Walrus*:

It often seems as though the sheer glut of data itself has supplanted the kind of focused, reflective attention that might make this information useful in the first place. The dysfunction of our information environment is an outgrowth of its extraordinary fecundity. Digital communications technology has demonstrated a striking capacity to subdivide our attention into smaller and smaller increments; increasingly, it seems as if the day's work has become a matter of interrupting the interruptions.

In a recent report, *Information Overload: We Have Met the Enemy and He Is Us*, the research firm Basex concluded that interruptions take up nearly 30 percent of a knowledge worker's day and end up costing American businesses \$650 billion annually. Other studies show that interruptions cause significant impairments in performance on IQ tests.

In many ways, the modern age—and the Internet, in particular—is a veritable minefield of distractions. This poses a central challenge to news organizations whose mandate is to inform the public. Research by Pablo Boczkowski, who teaches communication studies at Northwestern University, has revealed that when we consume news online we do so for significantly less time than in print and that we do it while

we're working. Further complicating matters is the disruptive nature of online advertising. Intrusive Web advertisements—*washingtonpost.com* recently featured one in which a Boeing helicopter flies right across the text of a news story—exploit our orienting network, which evolved to respond quickly to novel stimuli. Could we train ourselves to suppress our tendency to be distracted by such advertising? "You can get somewhat better, but it's hard to resist because it'll produce orienting," Posner explains. "The way you resist it is you bring your attention back as quickly as you can." Yet even if we were somehow able to eliminate ads, the sheer number of articles, headlines, and video and audio feeds on news Web sites makes focused attention difficult. Having to decide where to direct our attention and then maintain it makes reading and retaining news online a formidable task.

The Attention Economy

One of the most useful frameworks for understanding journalism's challenges and behavior in the information age is the notion of the attention economy. Economics is the study of the allocation of resources and the basic principles of supply and demand, after all, and about a decade ago a handful of economists and scholars came up with the concept of the attention economy as a way of wrestling with the problem of having too much information—an oversupply, if you will—and not enough time or people to absorb it all.

The dynamics of the attention economy have created a complicated and hypercompetitive arena for news production and consumption. News media must not only compete with one another, as well as with an ever-increasing assortment of information and entertainment options, but also with the very thing that supports their endeavors—advertising. In fact, the advertising industry has been struggling with the dynamics of the attention economy for a couple of decades now. As the advertising landscape becomes more saturated, advertisers must work harder to get their messages to the consumer. But as Mark Crispin Miller, professor of media ecology at New York University, notes in the *Frontline* documentary *The Persuaders*:

Every effort to break through the clutter is just more clutter. Ultimately, if you don't have clean, plain borders and backdrops for your ads, if you don't have that blank space, that commons, that virgin territory, you have a very hard time making yourself heard. The most obvious metaphor is a room full of people, all screaming to be heard. What this really means, finally, is that advertising is asphyxiating itself.

The news media also run the risk of self-asphyxiation in an information landscape crowded with headlines, updates, and news feeds. In order to garner audience attention and maintain financial viability, media outlets are increasingly concerned with the "stickiness" of their content. According to Douglas Rushkoff, host of *The Persuaders* and author of the forthcoming book *Life Incorporated*, the question for these organizations has become, "How do we stick the eyeballs onto our content and ultimately deliver the eyeballs to our sponsors?" As he dryly points out, "That's a very different mandate than how do we make information—real information—available

'In a world with vastly more information than we can process, journalists are the most important processors we have.'

to people. The information economy, then, is a competitive space. So as more people who are information providers think of themselves as competing for eyeballs rather than competing for a good story, then journalism's backwards." The rise of sound bites, headlines, snippets, infotainment, and celebrity gossip are all outgrowths of this attempt to grab audience attention—and advertising money. Visit a cable-news Web site most any day for an example along the lines of POLICE: WOMAN IN COW SUIT CHASED KIDS (CNN); or MAN BEATS TEEN GIRL WAITING IN MCDONALD'S LINE (Fox News). As Northwestern's Boczkowski points out, "Unlike when most of the media were organized in monopolistic or oligopolistic markets, now they are far more competitive; the cost of ignoring customer preferences is much higher."

Meanwhile, the massive increase in information production and the negligible cost of distributing and storing information online have caused it to lose value. Eli Noam, director of the Columbia Institute for Tele-Information, explains that this price deflation is only partly offset by an increase in demand in the digital age, since the time we have to consume information is finite. "On the whole—on the per-minute, per-line, per-word basis—information has continuously declined in price," says Noam. "The deflation makes it very difficult for many companies to stay in business for a long time."

Thus, we come to the heart of journalism's challenge in an attention economy: in order to preserve their vital public-service function—not to mention survive—news organizations need to reevaluate their role in the information landscape and reinvent themselves to better serve their consumers. They need to raise the value of the information they present, rather than diminish it. As it stands now, they often do the opposite.

More-Faster-Better

"Living and working in the midst of information resources like the Internet and the World Wide Web can resemble watching a firefighter attempt to extinguish a fire with napalm," write Paul Duguid and John Seely Brown, information scientists, in *The Social Life of Information*. "If your Web page is hard to understand, link to another. If a 'help' system gets overburdened, add a 'help on using help.' If your answer isn't here, then click on through another 1,000 pages. Problems with information? Add more."

Like many businesses in the information age, news outlets have been steadily increasing the volume and speed of their

output. As the proliferation of information sources on the Web continues at a breakneck pace, news media compete for attention by adding content and features—blogs, live chat sessions with journalists, video and audio streams, and slideshows. Much of this is of excellent quality. But taken together, these features present a quandary: Do we persevere or retreat in the face of too much information? And as the AP study showed, even young news consumers get fatigued.

In psychology, passivity resulting from a lack of control is referred to as "learned helplessness." Though logic would suggest that an increase in available news would give consumers more control, this is not actually the case. As Barry Schwartz, the Dorwin Cartwright Professor of Social Theory and Social Action at Swarthmore College, argues in his book *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less*, too many choices can be burdensome. "Instead of feeling in control, we feel unable to cope," he writes. "Freedom of choice eventually becomes a tyranny of choice."

A recent study by Northwestern University's Media Management Center supports this phenomenon. It found that despite their interest in the 2008 election, young adults avoid political news online "because they feel too much information is coming at them all at once and too many different things are competing for their attention." The study participants said they wanted news organizations to display less content in order to highlight the essential information. "Young people want the site design to signal to them what's really important... instead of being confronted by a bewildering array of choices," write the researchers in their final report, *From "Too Much" to "Just Right": Engaging Millennials in Election News on the Web*.

The instinct that more is better is deeply ingrained in the modern psyche. David Levy, a professor at The Information School of the University of Washington, uses the phrase "more-better-faster" to describe the acceleration of society that began with the Industrial Revolution. According to Levy, we tend to define productivity in terms of speed and volume rather than quality of thought and ideas. "We are all now expected to complete more tasks in a smaller amount of time," writes Levy in a 2007 journal article. "And while the new technologies *do* make it remarkably efficient and easy to search for information and to collect masses of potentially relevant sources on a huge variety of topics, they can't, in and of themselves, clear the space and time needed to absorb and to reflect on what has been collected." In the case of news production, Swarthmore's Schwartz agrees. "The rhythm of the news cycle has changed so dramatically that what's really been excluded," he says, "is the time that it takes to think."

Implications for Democracy

Our access to digital information, as well as our ability to instantly publish, share, and improve upon it at negligible cost, hold extraordinary promise for realizing the democratic

ideals of journalism. Yet as we've seen, many news consumers are unable or unwilling to navigate what Michael Delli Carpini refers to as the "chaotic and gateless information environment that we live in today."

When people had fewer information and entertainment options, journalistic outlets were able to produce public-affairs content without having to worry excessively about audience share. As the Internet and the 24/7 news cycle splinter readership and attention spans, this is no longer the case. "Real journalism is a kind of physician-patient relationship where you don't pander to readers," says Bob Garfield, a columnist for *Advertising Age* and co-host of NPR's *On the Media*. "You give them some of what they want and some of what you as the doctor-journalist think they ought to have." Unfortunately, many news outlets feel they can no longer afford to strike the right balance.

As information proliferates, meanwhile, people inevitably become more specialized both in their careers and their interests. This nichification—the basis for *Wired* editor Chris Anderson's breakthrough concept of the Long Tail—means that shared public knowledge is receding, as is the likelihood that we come in contact with beliefs that contradict our own. Personalized home pages, newsfeeds, and e-mail alerts, as well as special-interest publications lead us to create what sociologist Todd Gitlin disparagingly referred to as "my news, my world." Serendipitous news—accidentally

**Too many choices can be burdensome:
'Instead of feeling in control, we feel
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encountered information—is far less frequent in a world of TiVo and online customization tools.

Viewed in this light, the role of the journalist is more important than ever. "As society becomes splintered," writes journalist and author David Shenk in *Data Smog*, "it is journalists who provide the vital social glue to keep us at least partly intact as a common unit." Journalists work to deliver the big picture at a time when the overload of information makes it hard to piece it together ourselves. "The journalist's job isn't to pay attention simply to one particular field," explains Paul Duguid. "The job is to say, 'Well, what are all the different fields that bear on this particular story?' They give us the breadth that none of us can have because we're all specialists in our own particular area." In other words, the best journalism does not merely report and deliver information, it places it in its full and proper context.

Journalism's New Role

The primacy placed on speed and volume in the information age has led to an uneven news landscape. "There is an over-allocation of resources on breaking and developing news production and constant updates," observes Boczkowski. "I think many news organizations are overdoing it." While headlines and updates are undoubtedly important, their accumulation is problematic. "Increasingly, as the abundance of information overwhelms us all, we need not simply more information, but people to assimilate, understand, and make sense of it," write Duguid and Seely Brown.

The question, then, is how?

As David Shenk presciently noted more than a decade ago, "In a world with vastly more information than we can process, journalists are the most important processors we have." The researchers who conducted the study for the AP concluded that the news fatigue they observed among young adults resulted from "an overload of basic staples in the news diet—the facts and updates that tend to dominate the digital news environment." In other words, the news they were encountering was underprocessed.

In order to address the problem, the AP has made a number of changes in the way it approaches news production. For starters, it instituted a procedure it calls 1-2-3 filing, which attempts to reduce news clutter and repetition (the days of endless write-throughs are over) while also acknowledging the unpackaged and real-time nature of news in the digital world. With 1-2-3 filing, reporters produce news content in three discrete parts, which they file separately: a headline, a short present-tense story, and, when appropriate, a longer in-depth account. By breaking down the news in this way, the AP hopes to eliminate the redundancy and confusion caused by filing a full-length article for every new story development. In 1-2-3 filing, each component replaces the previous component: the headline is replaced by the present-tense story, which is then replaced by the in-depth account.

The AP has also launched a series of initiatives aimed at providing consumers with deeper, more analytical content. It has created a Top Stories Desk at its New York headquarters to identify and "consider the big-picture significance" of the most important stories of the day. It has also begun developing interactive Web graphics to help explain complicated and ongoing stories like Hurricane Katrina and the Minnesota bridge collapse. And for 2008, the AP launched "Measure of a Nation," a multimedia series dedicated to examining the election "through the prism of American culture, rather than simply the candidates and the horse race." "Measure of a Nation" packages take a historical approach to covering such notions as myth, elitism, and celebrity in American presidential politics. In one article published in late August, for example, journal-

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Picture This

The infographic comes of age

BY SUSHMA SUBRAMANIAN

THE INFOGRAPHIC WAS AMONG MAN'S EARLIEST MEANS OF COMMUNICATION (think petroglyph), yet after millennia of evolution, this marriage of text and images is only now realizing its full potential as a journalistic tool. The proliferation of data, the ease of access to that data, and the emergence of new ways to carve it up and serve it to overburdened readers have turned yesterday's static, often redundant graphics into animated, interactive, and dynamic efforts that are one of our most promising strategies for making complex stories digestible.

Much of the experimentation and development of infographic techniques is happening at universities. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology's SENSEable City Laboratory, for example, created Real Time Rome, which uses cell-phone signals to chart the movement of the city's population throughout the day. UCLA statistician Mark Hansen turned digital technology into art in the lobby of the new *New York Times* building, through a system that culls the most-used phrases in the news-media databases and flashes them on rows of screens.

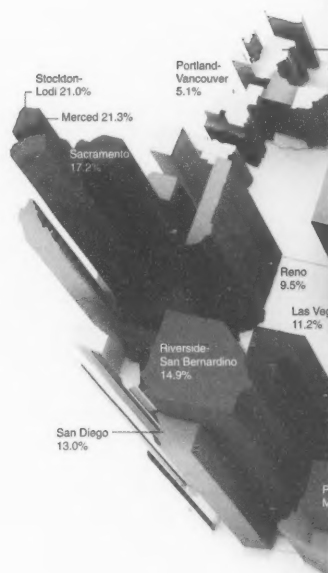
Making a cool infographic is one thing. But making one that serves a journalistic purpose requires a pairing of the ability to visualize statistical information with a reporter's sense of news judgment. Hannah Fairfield, a graphics editor at the *Times*, is one of this new breed of infographic journalists. Last spring, as the subprime story was blowing up, Fairfield created an infographic that illustrated and explained the concentrations of subprime mortgages and foreclosures around the country. She collected data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and other sources, and separated the numbers into two sets—one that showed subprime mortgages as a percentage of all mortgages in counties throughout the U.S., and another that showed subprime mortgage foreclosures as a percentage of all subprime mortgages in metropolitan areas. She then imported this data into a program called ArcMap, a geographical information system that allows users to create maps to analyze spatial data.

Her foreclosures map showed dark green clusters—the highest concentrations—in Florida, areas of California, and the Rust Belt states of Michigan and Ohio. The same regions were often some of the densest points on Fairfield's second map, which plotted the subprime mortgages as a percentage of all mortgages. But this second map also showed that in other areas with high numbers of subprime mortgages, such as in Dallas or Memphis, homeowners were more likely to be able to keep up with their mortgage payments.

Fairfield wanted to know what accounted for the different fortunes of these homeowners, so she donned her reporter's hat and interviewed financial analysts, who explained that the foreclosures in California and Florida were mostly the result of overspeculation, while those in the Rust Belt states were primarily attributable to job losses. Neither factor was predominant in the South.

Fairfield needed to combine these narratives into a single map, since asking readers to toggle back and forth would risk losing them. She made the map three-dimensional, so height could represent the number of subprime foreclosures and color could represent percentages of subprime mortgages. The final map was accompanied by two one-dimensional sidebar maps, one that showed the rise in construction permits issued for housing units from 2004 to 2007, to illustrate the problem of overbuilding, and another that used unemployment rates from December 2007 to illustrate the problem of job losses.

Together, the three maps distilled the causes and effects of a complex and ongoing story into a visual report that could be grasped in seconds. "It's a visual narrative," Fairfield says. **CJR**



METRICS

HANNAH FAIRFIELD

In the Shadow Of Foreclosures

IN the subprime mortgage squeeze, some regions are feeling the pain more acutely than others.

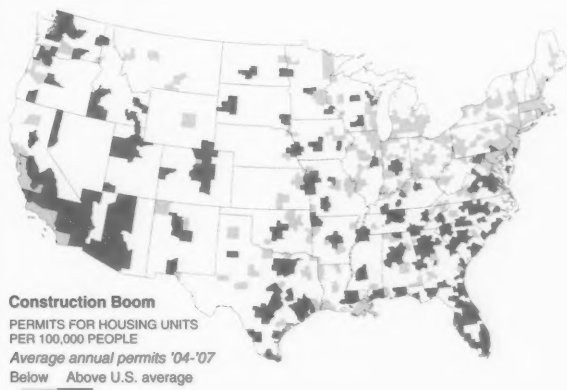
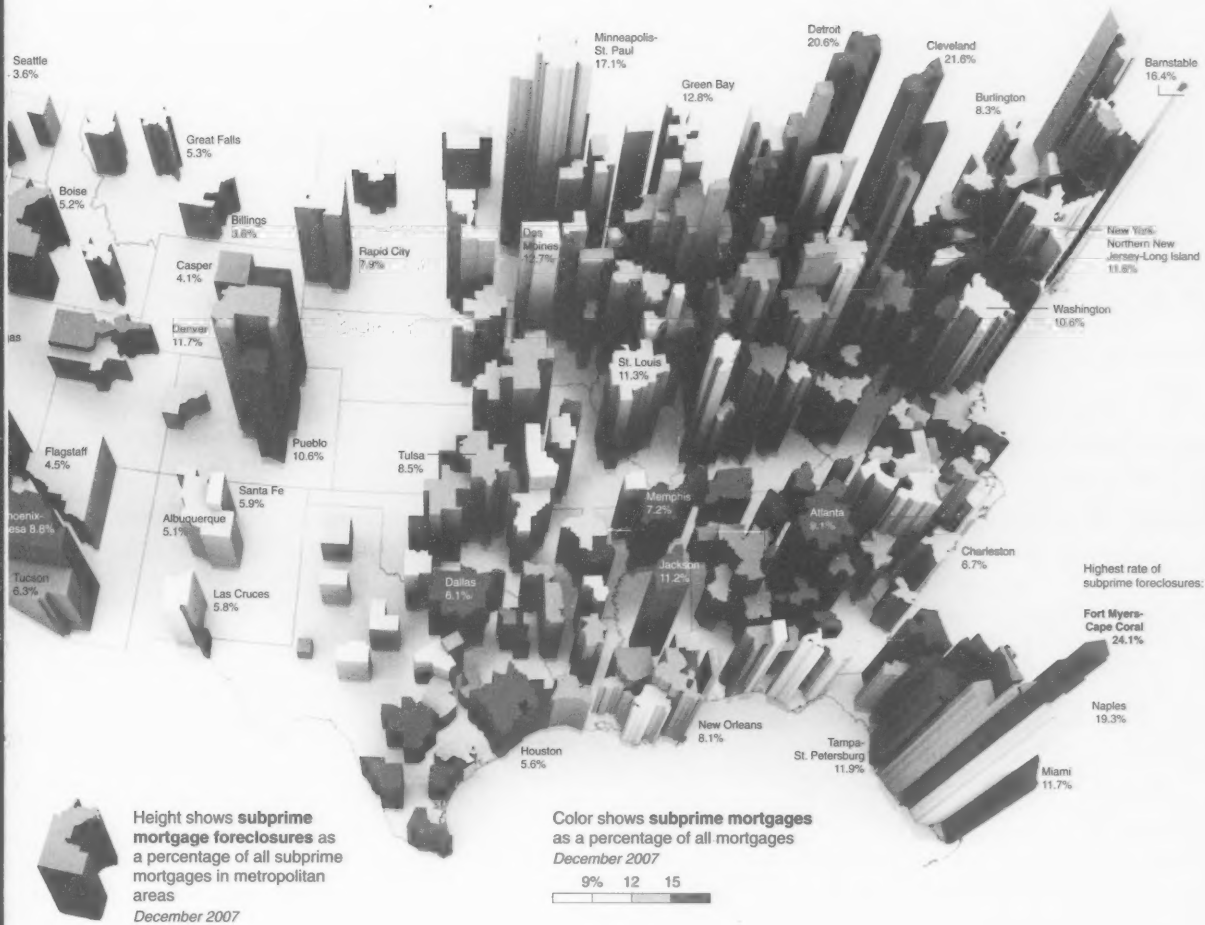
Although many Southern metropolitan areas have high percentages of subprime mortgages, homeowners in those areas have largely been able to pay their bills, so subprime foreclosure rates are low.

Not so in the Rust Belt, where subprime mortgages are less common but foreclosure rates are sky-high, mostly a result of rising unemployment.

And overbuilding in regions of Florida, California and other states with housing bubbles lured overeager residents to become speculators, buying up several homes with the expectation that their values would rise. Getting subprime loans was all too easy.

But paying the loans as housing prices fall is all too hard, and many economists believe that foreclosures will continue to rise.

"The collapse will affect other markets, like New York, Boston and D.C.," said Dean Baker, co-director of the Center for Economic and Policy Research. "Suburban areas near those cities are already seeing prices plunge."



Sources: First American CoreLogic; LoanPerformance; Bureau of Labor Statistics; Census Bureau

ist Ted Anthony explains the powerful political influence of the Kennedy family over the past fifty years, drawing parallels between the campaigns of JFK and RFK and that of Barack Obama. As the AP writes in its report, these changes in approach represent "a concerted effort to think about the news from an end-user's perspective, re-emphasizing a dimension to news gathering and editing that can get lost in the relentless rush of the daily news cycle."

Much like educational institutions, the best news organizations help people convert information into the knowledge they need to understand the world. As Richard Lanham explains in *The Economics of Attention*, "Universities have never been simply data-mining and storage operations. They have always taken as their central activity the conversion of data into useful knowledge and into wisdom. They do this by creating attention structures that we call curricula, courses of study." Institutions of journalism do it by crafting

'There are some stories—and the mortgage crisis is a great example—where until I grasp the *whole*, I am unable to make sense of *any part*.'

thoughtful and illuminating stories. "Journalists who limit their role to news flashes are absolving themselves of any overarching obligation to the audience," writes Shenk in *The End of Patience*. "Mere telling focuses on the mechanics of transmitting information of the moment, while education assumes a responsibility for making sure that knowledge sticks." The most valuable journalism is the kind that *explains*. "The first and foremost role that a journalist plays is to provide the information in a context that we wouldn't be able to get as amateurs," says Delli Carpini. "And I think that's where journalism should be focusing."

As it turns out, explanatory journalism may have a promising future in the market for news. On May 9, in partnership with NPR News, *This American Life* dedicated its hour-long program to explaining the housing crisis. "The Giant Pool of Money" quickly became the most popular episode in the show's thirteen-year history. CJR praised the piece (in "Boiler Room," the essay by Dean Starkman in our September/October issue) as "the most comprehensive and insightful look at the system that produced the credit crisis." And on his blog, *PressThink*, Jay Rosen, a journalism professor at New York University, wrote that the program was "probably the best work of explanatory journalism I have ever heard." Rosen went on to note that by helping people understand an issue, explanatory journalism actually creates a market for news. It gives people a reason to tune in. "There are some stories—and the mortgage crisis is a great example—where until I grasp

the *whole*, I am unable to make sense of *any part*," he writes. "Not only am I not a customer for news reports prior to that moment, but the very frequency of the updates alienates me from the providers of those updates because the news stream is adding daily to my feeling of being ill-informed, overwhelmed, out of the loop."

Rather than simply contributing to the noise of the unending torrent of headlines, sound bites, and snippets, NPR and *This American Life* took the time to step back, report the issue in depth, and then explain it in a way that illuminated one of the biggest and most complicated stories of the year. As a result of the program's success, NPR News formed a multimedia team in late August to explain the global economy through a blog and podcast, both of which are called "Planet Money." And on October 3, *This American Life* and NPR aired a valuable follow-up episode, "Another Frightening Show About the Economy," which examined the deepening credit crisis, including how it might have been prevented and Washington's attempts at a bailout.

Along with supplying depth and context, another function of the modern news organization is to act as an information filter. No news outlet better embodies this aim than *The Week*, a magazine dedicated to determining the top news stories of the week and then synthesizing them. As the traditional newsweeklies are struggling to remain relevant and financially viable, *The Week* has experienced steady circulation growth over the past several years. "The purpose of *The Week* is not to tell people the news but to make sense of the news for people," explains editor William Falk. "Ironically, in this intensive information age, it's in some ways harder than ever to know what's important and what's not. And so I often say to people, 'With *The Week*, you're hiring this group of really smart, well-versed people that read for you fifty hours a week and then sit down and basically give you a report on what they learned that week.'"

Rather than merely excerpting and reprinting content, this slim magazine takes facts, text, and opinions from a variety of sources—approximately a hundred per issue—to create its own articles, columns, reviews, and obituaries. As Falk explains, there's a certain "alchemy" that occurs when you synthesize multiple accounts of a news story. And *The Week's* success suggests that consumers are willing to pay for this. "We're a service magazine as much as we are a journalism magazine," says Falk. "People work ten, eleven hours a day. They're very busy. There are tremendous demands on their time. There are other things competing for your leisure time—you can go online, you can watch television or a DVD. So what we do is deliver to you, in a one-hour package or less, is a smart distillation of what happened last week that you need to pay attention to."

One ally in journalism's struggle to deal with information overload, meanwhile, may be the digital machinery that

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Trimming the Hedges

Web jungle, Web garden—you decide

BY CURTIS BRAINARD



It may seem like people have been gawking at the proliferation of online news sources for ages now, but it was not so long ago that readers had a much narrower field of options. The Democratic and Republican national conventions threw that fact into high relief at the end of last summer. *The New York Times* media critic David Carr catalogued the presence of online news outlets during the Democratic gathering: “Politico, which also puts out

a newspaper, had 40 people in Denver. The Huffington Post had 20 people, Talking Points Memo had 9, Daily Kos had 10, Slate had 7 and Salon had 9. That list is far from comprehensive and does not begin to describe how thoroughly mediated this convention was.” And save for the latter two (which sent the fewest reporters) and TPM, all of those outlets just wrapped up either their first or second presidential campaign.

Add to this mix the seemingly endless variety of blogs, and it’s no wonder that many readers—even professional journalists—feel lost. What most misunderstand, though, is that the problem is not information overload, but rather access-to-information overload. Since well before the creation of the printing press, there has been more news available on a given day than any one person could follow, and more information than any one reporter could process. It’s just that today both reporter and reader have much greater access to the news and information, and as such, there is a greater need to employ filters and other tools to help us organize and manage the deluge.

Plenty of these devices already exist, but it takes some time to set them up

and maintain them. Most are right under readers’ and journalists’ LCD-strained eyes, embedded in the program that provides all that access to the news in the first place: the Web browser. Bookmarks (or Favorites, for PC users) are one of software engineers’ simplest but greatest gifts to news hogs. The problem is that it’s so easy to bookmark pages that most people forget to organize them, much like photos in an album.

It is amazing what a well-organized set of folders and subfolders (labeled any way you see fit) for bookmarks, RSS feeds, and e-mails (not to mention podcasts, videos, and photos, all of which can be filed neatly on an iPod) will accomplish. At the rate people bookmark, subscribe to feeds, and sign up for e-mail alerts, however, it is also amazing how much time it can take to keep on top of it all. I probably spend a couple of hours a month clearing out unwanted items and sorting new ones.

Once that base of operations is established, though, the Web is your oyster. Some will still complain that while browsing, they often get carried off down some undesired link trail or that, later, they can never find some-

thing that they’d like to recall. That’s information overload, I guess, but setting your browser to open new windows separately or in tabs, and relying on the history menu to find lost threads fix most problems. Sure, some sand will always slip through your fingers, but you’ll certainly be catching more of it than ever before.

The tools are only getting better with online storage. If you stick with your browser’s bookmarks, make sure you’re using a free program, like Foxmarks (if you’re on Firefox), that stores them online. You can access them from anywhere, and if your machine craps out, you won’t lose them. Even better, use a social bookmarking site like delicious that allows you to sort Web pages under multiple tags at one time and search other libraries as well.

A full range of RSS feeds and e-mail alerts should complement bookmarks. Together they form a sort of triumvirate. Each has its own uses, and I like to build in plenty of overlap, receiving information from many of the same sites via all three pathways. That may sound like it compounds the problem of information overload, but again, either your browser or a site like delicious offers opportunities to group them all together and turn your news jungle into an easily navigable but high-maintenance garden. All you have to do is trim the hedges once in a while. **CJR**

CURTIS BRAINARD runs *The Observatory*, CJR.org’s critique of science and environmental coverage.

brought it about in the first place. While digital archiving and data tagging cannot replace human interpretation and editorial judgment, they have an important role to play in helping us navigate the informational sea. As any news consumer knows, searching for or following a story can be frustrating on the Internet, where information is both pervasive and transient. In its study, the AP observed that young consumers struggled to find relevant in-depth news. So the wire service stepped up an effort begun in 2005 to tag all its articles, images, and videos according to a classification system of major news topics and important people, places, and things. These tags allow consumers, as well as news organizations and aggregators, to more effectively find and link to AP content. A number of other organizations, including *The New York Times* (check out the Times Topics tab on nytimes.com), *The Washington Post*, and CNN have similar projects under way, promising an opportunity to rapidly—and often automatically—provide consumers

‘Maybe what news organizations should be now is not gatekeepers so much as guides. You want people who can guide you through all this stuff.’

with a high level of detail, context, and graphical means of explanation.

The Web site for BBC News may be the best example of how journalistic organizations can deliver context in the digital environment. A news story about the Russia-Georgia crisis, for example, is displayed alongside a list of links to a map of the region, a country profile, an explanation of the crisis, a summary of Russian foreign policy, and related news articles and video footage. All online BBC News stories are presented in this manner, giving consumers multiple ways to learn about and understand an issue. While no American site is this comprehensive, a handful of major news outlets, from CNN to NPR to the *National Journal*, have used this approach in creating special election 2008 Web pages. By linking stories to one another and to background information and analysis, news organizations help news consumers find their way through a flood of information that without such mediation could be overwhelming and nearly meaningless.

Why Journalism Won't Disappear

While it's true that the Web allows the average individual to create and disseminate information without the help of a publishing house or a news organization, this does not mean journalism institutions are no longer relevant. "Oddly enough, information is one of the things that in the end needs brands almost more than anything else," explains Paul Duguid. "It

needs a recommendation, a seal of approval, something that says this is reliable or true or whatever. And so journalists, but also the institutions of journalism as one aspect of this, become very important."

Moreover, the flood of news created by the production bias of the Internet could, in the end, point to a new role for journalistic institutions. "We're expecting people who are not librarians, who are not knowledge engineers to do the work of knowledge engineers and librarians," says Jonathan Spira, CEO and chief analyst for the business research firm Basex and an expert in information overload. In other words, most of us lack the skills—not to mention the time, attention, and motivation—to make sense of an unrelenting torrent of information. This is where journalists and news organizations come in. The fact that there is more information than there are people or time to consume it—the classic economy-of-attention problem—represents a financial opportunity for news organizations. "I think that the consumers, being subjects to this flood, need help, and they know it," says Eli Noam. "And so therefore they want to have publications that will be selecting along the lines of quality and credibility in order to make their lives easier. For that, people will be willing to pay." A challenge could become an opportunity.

In fact, journalism that makes sense of the news may even increase news consumption. As Jay Rosen points out on his blog, explanatory journalism creates a "scaffold of understanding in the users

that future reports can attach to, thus driving demand for the updates that today are more easily delivered." In a similar fashion—by providing links to background information and analysis alongside every news story—the BBC gives consumers frameworks for understanding that generate an appetite for more information.

The future of news depends on the willingness of journalistic organizations to adjust to the new ecology and new economy of information in the digital age. "I think in some ways, we need a better metaphor," says Delli Carpini. "The gatekeeping metaphor worked pretty well in the twentieth century, but maybe what news organizations should be now is not gatekeepers so much as guides. You don't want gatekeepers that can say you can get this and you can't get that. You want people who can guide you through all this stuff."

Ironically, if out of desperation for advertising dollars, news organizations continue to chase eyeballs with snippets and sound bites, they will ultimately lose the war for consumer attention. Readers and viewers will go elsewhere, and so will advertisers. But if news organizations decide to rethink their role and give consumers the context and coherence they want and need in an age of overload, they may just achieve the financial stability they've been scrambling for, even as they recapture their public-service mission before it slips away. **CJR**

BREE NORDENSON is a freelance writer.

At Risk in Mexico

Drug violence is silencing the press

BY MONICA CAMPBELL

Emilio Gutiérrez Soto, a longtime reporter in the small desert town of Ascensión, in Mexico's northern border state of Chihuahua, was determined to own the story of the government's military surge in the state, an effort to crush the spiraling violence fueled by the drug cartels. Writing for *El Diario del Noroeste*, a sister publication of a larger paper based in the border city of Ciudad Juárez, Gutiérrez spent the last several years chronicling the cases of citizens

who told him that military personnel had burst into their homes and conducted searches without permits. He reported on business owners who complained that soldiers had robbed them.

Then came the threats. An army major told Gutiérrez that he "should be afraid of us" and ordered him to stop reporting on military operations in Chihuahua. In May of this year, some fifty hooded and armed military personnel ransacked Gutiérrez's home. They said they were searching for weapons or drugs, but found nothing and left. In June, a trusted contact called Gutiérrez after overhearing a military official mention a kill order that was out on him. Gutiérrez, a forty-five-year-old single father, took his fifteen-year-old son, a change of clothes, and his press pass and went "like hell" for the United States border, where he pleaded for political asylum. He was taken to an immigration detention center in El Paso and separated from his son, who was placed in

a juvenile center and then released in August (he is still in the U.S., but Gutiérrez declined to say where). At press time, Gutiérrez remained in detention, awaiting a decision on his case.

Gutiérrez said returning to Mexico wasn't an option. "They'll have my head," he said in a phone interview from the detention center.

For years, journalists in Mexico have worked in a climate plagued by violent drug traffickers and the official corruption that lets them operate with impunity. But the violence is now reaching record levels, despite attempts by Mexico's president, Felipe Calderón, to curtail it. Today, Mexico is considered the most dangerous place for journalists in Latin America, with more than twenty reporters killed there since 2000, according to the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists. Another seven have gone missing since 2005 and are presumed dead. Not surprisingly, the rising violence—and the sense that the government not only offers little protection but in some cases is just as threatening as the gangsters—is having a chilling effect on Mexican journalism. A few, like Gutiérrez, have fled the country, but for those still at work, the story of the drug traffickers is becoming increasingly off limits, even as it spreads and intensifies throughout the country. Self-censorship has become now a matter of self-preservation, and news outlets are avoiding publishing or broadcasting anything that could trigger a reprisal. For many, that means no cartel names, no witness identities, no revealing photographs.

Some newspapers have dropped bylines, and others have abandoned crime stories altogether. Intimidation is a factor for every journalist, from community radio reporters to top editors at the most influential outlets.

The situation is still the worst at the border, where the two leading drug cartels—the Sinaloa and Gulf cartels—are based and where fights over smuggling routes to the United States can be the most intense. But in the past two years, as the cartels and their private armies engage in a high-stakes battle for control of territory and smuggling routes throughout Mexico, the threats to journalists are increasingly being felt in southern states such as Veracruz and Tabasco, the west-central state of Michoacán, and traditionally safe cities like the northern industrial hub of Monterrey. The threats can range from menacing text messages and phone calls to far grislier warnings. In June, the editor of a newspaper in Tabasco that had been publishing stories about drug traffickers, arrived to

work to find a severed human head propped in front of the office building. Attached was a note addressed to the editor: "You are next."

None of the murders or disappearances has been solved, a fact that only adds to the journalists' sense that the government can't—or won't—protect them. This diminution of the press couldn't come at a worse time. In the past decade, the Mexican cartels have taken advantage of the decline of Colombia's Medellín and Cali cartels to become some of the world's most dominant drug smugglers. Their prize: control of a multibillion-dollar-a-year industry that provides drug users—particularly in the U.S.—their fix of cocaine, methamphetamine, heroin, and marijuana. The cartels have also expanded into side businesses—such as kidnapping, smuggling migrants, and arms trafficking—to further pump up their profits. To keep their businesses oiled and efficient, the cartels depend on the cooperation of corrupt government officials, judges, and law-enforcement officers.

In December 2006, soon after taking office, President Calderón launched an anti-cartel crackdown, dispersing more than 25,000 soldiers and more than 5,500 federal police throughout Mexico. Washington has noted Calderón's challenge and this year approved a three-year, \$1.1 billion anti-narcotics package for Mexico. But Calderón's surge has yet to break the traffickers' influence, and the federal police and soldiers are far outnumbered by local and state police, whose low wages make them more vulnerable to bribes and threats from the criminal gangs. Since the crackdown began, nearly five thousand people have died in drug-gang-related violence. This year is on pace to be Mexico's bloodiest, with the number of cartel-connected deaths from January through September 2008 topping 3,200, according to a tally kept by *Reforma*, a leading Mexican daily.

At the center of this struggle is Ciudad Juárez, just across the river from El Paso, Texas, which has become Mexico's most violent city. Sprawling across rugged desert in Chihuahua state, it was once known as a party town, a place Americans would flock to for its neon-signed cantinas and restaurants. But hard work also shapes the city's image. The North American Free Trade Agreement helped turn Ciudad Juárez into a hub for *maquiladoras*, or assembly factories confecting everything from car parts to wide-screen televisions for U.S. export. Many of the city's 1.3 million people work at the factories, earning about \$60 a week and living in tiny cinderblock homes set off dusty roads.

To *narcotraficantes*, Ciudad Juárez is considered a "good plaza," said Jorge Enrique González Nicolás, who coordinates the city's public defender's office. The term refers to a drug-smuggling corridor and, in Ciudad Juárez, it means proximity to prized drug-transfer points off U.S. interstate highways. An ongoing battle to control the plaza involves Mexico's biggest cartels, including gangs based in neighboring Sinaloa state led by the country's most-wanted man, Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán. He is one of Mexico's leading drug barons and fugitives, often likened to Colombia's infamous Pablo Escobar. Guzmán has repeatedly escaped from prison and has avoided extradition to the U.S., where he has a \$5 million bounty on his head.

Despite the presence of some 2,500 soldiers and federal police, more than a thousand people have been murdered in Ciudad Juárez so far this year—triple the total for all of 2007. The victims include police and high-ranking government officials, some of whom had been accused of helping the criminals either out of fear or for pay. On August 6, the city's new police homicide chief was gunned down as he stood barefoot and wearing only shorts in his driveway.

ONE SUMMER AFTERNOON, ARTURO CHACÓN CASTAÑÓN, a twenty-seven-year-old reporter, and a photographer named Raymundo Ruiz Morales, worked the crime beat for the daily *Norte de Ciudad Juárez*. Their morning started at Channel 44, the city's largest broadcaster, where the mother of a missing young girl gave interviews. After the press conference at the station, Chacón and Ruiz, a stocky thirty-eight-year-old, headed to the airport to cover the police transporting eleven high-level hit men to Mexico City. Sitting in their car after the perp walk, Ruiz and Chacón talked about the *narcocorridos*, the polka-like ballads that pay homage to drug traffickers and narrate their criminal sagas. The songs, which have a cult following in Mexico, are sometimes broadcast over police scanners after a drug gangster is nabbed. They are meant to both mock and intimidate police and journalists. "It's pretty chilling when you hear that music come through," said Ruiz. "It's like the bad guys are saying, 'We know *exactly* what you're up to. We're watching you.'"

Back at the newsroom, Chacón sat in a worn swivel chair and wrote. His stories are short and bare-boned. A copy of one of his recent front-page stories sat on his small desk. Its lead read like many others here: "Six people, among them a woman, were assassinated yesterday in different parts of the city, bringing the total homicide count in the last 24 hours to 17, according to the local attorney general's office." A run-down followed of where and how the victims were found. One man was rolled "in a grey blanket, his face wrapped in gauze and covered with a plastic bag." The article closely hewed to the police report. There is no analysis or context. No follow-up. "What am I supposed to do, ask the police for more information and look like some snoopy reporter? And what if the cop I ask is mixed up in the crime himself?" said Chacón. "We don't know who to trust."

Chacón has attempted investigative work. Early this year, he explored links between the skyrocketing number of stolen cars in Ciudad Juárez, criminal gangs, and the big family-owned, scrap-metal yards that are increasingly shipping metal to Asia and Africa. He began connecting local business moguls to the racket. Then, Chacón said, he got a call from a ranking official at the local attorney general's office who warned: "I hear you're gathering some interesting stuff. For your own good, I suggest you leave it alone." Chacón let the story go.

Ruiz has also backed off stories. Once, he says, he was tipped to a drug-stuffed safe house that had apparently been discovered by the cops. When he got there, an officer put a pistol to his side and told him to back off. "I suddenly realized what I'd walked into," said Ruiz. The police were protecting the stash. "I got the heck out."

Mexico's anti-drug fight has journalists in an even tighter knot. The beefed-up military and police presence has sparked a wave of allegations by citizens of abuse, including torture, unlawful detentions, and looting. In some towns, citizens have organized protests, asking President Calderón to protect them from the troops. During a speech in September, Calderón defended the military surge and reiterated his will to "use all resources within our reach" to keep criminals from overtaking Mexico. Journalists reporting on these issues must contend with stressed-out and ill-trained soldiers, their assault rifles at the ready, and anonymous threats from government officials eager to keep the business community calm while still making good on the federal government's pledge to nail the drug cartels. "When we report on any abuses, the military lashes out at us, asking which side we are on," said Rocío Gallegos, the news editor at *El Diario*, Ciudad Juárez's largest paper.

In February, the *Norte de Ciudad Juárez* decided to cut in-depth coverage of organized crime altogether and stick to official sources exclusively in the rest of its crime stories. That move came after one of its crime reporters, Carlos Huerta Muñoz, fled Mexico after getting anonymous death threats on his cell phone. "We can't be seen taking sides in this war," said the paper's editor, Alfredo Quijano. "Neither side wants to be seen as losing." Other papers have done the same, including the daily *El Mañana* in Nuevo Laredo, just across the border. In February 2006, unidentified gunmen took machine guns and a grenade to the newspaper's offices, which are now barricaded by a high concrete wall. A year before, the Sonora-based daily *El Imparcial* adopted the same self-censorship policy after one of its young crime reporters, Alfredo Jiménez Mota, disappeared after meeting a source in April 2005. Jiménez had written frequently about traffickers and their ties to police and local prosecutors, among other government officials.

Some journalists say shutting up isn't an option. "We must report aggressively," said Ricardo Ravelo, an investigative reporter at the national weekly *Proceso* who has written books on the cartels. "If not, we risk becoming an instrument for anybody who wants to corrupt us along the way." But when drug lords can kill with impunity, many reporters aren't willing to test their safety. "There's a lot of fear among reporters," said Carlos Lauría, who coordinates CPJ's Americas program. "They are frozen and don't feel capable of doing their jobs."

In Mexico, *chayote* (Spanish for a type of "squash") is slang for bribe. It's a term every journalist here knows and reflects a tradition that became standard practice during the seventy-one years of authoritarian rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), when politicians paid the press for favorable coverage or to remain silent. Despite promises to end it when Vicente Fox was elected president in 2000, breaking the PRI's stranglehold on Mexican politics, the practice continues and can now involve criminal groups coercing reporters to spy and inform. "We have to talk more about our own corruption," said Jorge Luis Aguirre, a fifty-year-old veteran journalist in Ciudad Juárez who runs *La Polaka*, a small online news site. Some journalists are just greedy.

Others can slip once and become beholden to criminal factions. "I think some reporters cave in and just want to feed their families," said Aguirre. At *Norte de Ciudad Juárez*, a staff photographer can make \$150 a week, a bit more than double a factory worker's weekly wages in the city. That rate plummets in poorer parts of Mexico, where journalists are among the worst paid in Latin America. In parts of Oaxaca, for instance, some freelance journalists get \$10 for a story.

Press-freedom groups are trying to raise awareness about the disintegrating situation of journalism in Mexico. Advocates say that as long as crimes go unsolved and the perpetrators remain free, a culture of impunity will persist and test Mexico's young democracy. "This goes beyond the press," said CPJ's Lauría. "It's about the ability of Mexicans to communicate freely." Steps taken by the Mexican government to protect press freedom have fallen short. In 2006, the Fox government created a special prosecutor's office for crimes against journalists. But it can't investigate cases linked to organized crime or actively prosecute cases. The office is widely considered ineffective—and even designed to fail. Some groups are now pushing for legislation that would make freedom-of-speech abuses federal crimes. State officials handle most crimes against the press, including murder. But press-freedom groups claim that local officials are often too intimidated by criminals to push investigations, or that they themselves are mixed up in the crime. Federalization isn't a "magic solution," said Lauría, but he argues that there must be political accountability at the highest level. In June, after meeting with CPJ board members in Mexico City, Calderón and Attorney General Eduardo Medina Mora pledged to federalize press crimes. Calderón is expected to propose legislation to do this before the end of this year.

Meanwhile, Gutiérrez, the reporter in detention in El Paso, hopes that a U.S. judge will side with his political asylum plea. The odds are against him. Violence is not necessarily grounds for asylum. Also, granting him asylum might open "a political can of worms in the U.S. and encourage other people fleeing crime in Mexico to come in," said Carlos Spector, Gutiérrez's lawyer.

Despite the diminishment of the press, people in Ciudad Juárez have a strong sense of what's going on. On a sweltering August afternoon, Javier Paliría, a twenty-one-year-old taco seller waited for customers near a bridge that connects Ciudad Juárez to El Paso. In front of it stood a large wooden cross covered with nails, each memorializing the murdered and missing young women whose stories have drawn international attention and hardened the city's violent image. Near the cross, federal police sat in black pickups and drank liter-sized Cokes. "They showed up here a few months ago," said Paliría, nodding toward the police. "But everybody knows it's the gangs and narcos controlling the place." He has seen armed men rob small businesses in his neighborhood and leave their victims on the streets. "You don't need to read the papers to know what's going on here," said Paliría. "It's right in front of you." **CJR**

MONICA CAMPBELL is a freelance journalist based in Mexico City. She is the Mexico consultant for the Committee to Protect Journalists.



Murrow's Boy

Dan Rather in high definition

BY JESSE SUNENBLICK

The headquarters of *Dan Rather Reports* is a small, disheveled space just off Times Square in Manhattan, cluttered with temporary office equipment and distinguished by a low drop ceiling that evokes the abode of an insurgency of pamphleteers. In a far corner is Rather's office. Much of his old furniture has been transplanted from CBS, and a khaki trench coat from his globetrotting days hangs nostalgically in a nook. On a sea chest rests a plaque bearing

advice from Benjamin Franklin: "If you would not be forgotten, as soon as you were dead and rotten, either write things worth reading, or do things worth the writing." Rather is enmeshed in a \$70 million breach-of-contract lawsuit against CBS that could help determine how he will be remembered, but the quote registers more as inspiration than epitaph. "I'm still trying to do great journalism," he told me. "I don't feel I've ever really done that. I keep hoping there's the potential. Kennedy, Vietnam, Watergate, Afghanistan, any number of exposés for *60 Minutes*, Tiananmen Square, 9/11—all of that is part of the record, which is not yet complete."

Like a lot of things in Rather's world, *Reports* was conceived as an ode to his "polar star," Edward R. Murrow, and specifically as an update on *See It Now*, Murrow's landmark television show from the 1950s. Notwithstanding the persistent attempts over the years to decipher Rather's personality and the odd moments that have pocked his career, his

allegiance to Murrow is often missed, or misunderstood. Rather, who turned seventy-seven in October, has been imitating Murrow ever since he was a child bedridden for months with rheumatic fever, inhabiting the universe of Murrow's radio dispatches from Europe during World War II. When he took over the CBS anchor chair from Walter Cronkite in 1981, Rather decided to "dance with the one that brought me" and emphasize his reporting skills; against many peoples' advice, he exhumed the reporter-anchor hybrid created by Murrow and made it his own. When George Clooney's biopic on Murrow, *Good Night, and Good Luck*, arrived in New York in 2005, Rather saw it immediately—and then he saw it several more times. At the Manhattan premiere, Rather said, he "nearly levitated" from his chair. "It brought back a flood of memories. I was humbled. Here's Murrow, who could have retired in 1947 and been on everybody's all-time team, but he didn't. I was the last person to leave the screening. I wanted to learn." Rather, of course, was suggesting that in 2004, after CBS eased him off the air over his unsubstantiated report that President Bush got preferential treatment in the Texas Air National Guard, he could have retired, too.

On *See It Now*, Murrow gave the audience what Rather likes to call "added value"—his high standard for depth and originality. But Murrow was, more essentially, a television pioneer, and a central attraction of Rather's show is seeing a former stalwart of the establishment, a millionaire and an icon of a decidedly different era, recast in

similar terms, on HDNet, a boutique cable channel and with a fraction of his former audience (HDNet has around ten million subscribers, but won't release numbers for how many watch *Reports*; when Rather left the anchor chair at CBS *Evening News*, he had nearly eight million viewers nightly). Playing Rather's William Paley in this improbable sequel is Mark Cuban, the billionaire Internet entrepreneur who co-founded HDNet hoping to cash in on the high-definition technology craze, and who, in the summer of 2006, plucked Rather from the purgatorial aftermath of his *60 Minutes II* report on Bush, offering him carte blanche to develop an investigative news show that would function as a counterpoint to the superficial inclinations of network news. While the analogy isn't perfect, the show is, surely, a throwback. Many of the twenty-five staff members are exiles from big media companies, happily untethered from the burden of ratings, and the productions have an anachronistic bent:

long, sober, and largely advertisement-free documentaries thoroughly devoid of excessive sentiment and the “gets” and “money shots” of prime-time TV. “Cuban deserves a lot of credit. I had my doubts,” Rather told me. “But the only thing he ever said to me was, ‘Have guts and do excellent work.’” The effect, Rather claims, has been rejuvenating. “This is sheer joy for me. I’ve never been happier or more satisfied. One reason I’m talking to you is to spread the word.”

It was interesting, given the degree of animus surrounding Rather, to hear him talk about happiness and satisfaction, neither of which has ever been considered indispensable to the Rather brand. One reason I was talking to him was that there was something intriguing about the notion of Dan Rather at peace, even though I had never fully bought the

Rather's attempts to imitate Murrow often had the effect of supreme effort yielding mixed results.

various simplistic characterizations that he had been saddled with over the years, from “bizarro Rather” to “liberal Rather” to “folksy, sentimental Rather.” He dodges most questions that attempt to get at his place in history, but Wayne Nelson, his executive producer on *Reports*, told me that Rather is “enjoying life for the first time,” and I thought maybe he’d open up and talk candidly about his departure from CBS, and about his most dramatic career moments, many of which are among his most contentious. I wanted to reconcile all the ideas that people have about him with the ideas that he has about himself. I also thought that sooner or later he might revert to form. In June, he’d indicated the possibility of getting exclusive interviews with the presidential candidates for what he called “a sit down, not a debate—a talk about things not normally talked about, like crumbling national infrastructure and schools.” Given his notorious run-ins with politicians—he once publicly mocked President Nixon at a press conference in Houston during the Watergate crisis, and later sparred with vice president George H. W. Bush during an interview about the Iran-Contra scandal—I wondered what might happen if he sat with, say, John McCain, and dug into the senator’s positions on the war in Iraq.

But the idea fizzled. Part of it was no doubt due to HDNet’s stature. “We can’t make the argument for a mass audience,” Rather told me. “I think we have a good argument to make about the quality of audience. But we’re seen as peripheral.” Still, any high-profile interview Rather now seeks is also affected by lingering questions about his reputation that are at the center of his lawsuit against CBS, in which he alleges that he was made the scapegoat for the forged-document

scandal at the heart of the Bush story. The gaudiest claim is a kind of Washington conspiracy theory: Rather alleges that Viacom, CBS’s parent company in 2004, fired him to curry favor with the Bush administration and protect its business interests in Washington, which in 2004 included the relaxing of media-ownership laws. “The whole beating heart of the suit,” Rather has said, “is to put some sunlight on a fact—and it is a fact—that these huge conglomerates that control eighty to eighty-five percent of communications need favors in Washington.” Clearly, though, the lawsuit has an additional purpose: to provide a stage for the evidence Rather says he has that proves he and his *60 Minutes II* producer, Mary Mapes, got the Bush story right.

One morning in June, I met Rather for breakfast at Nectar, a modest Upper East Side coffee shop where Rather blended into the time-worn surroundings. When talk turned to the lawsuit, he again invoked his polar star. “I’m constantly asking myself, ‘What would Murrow do?’” he said. “He spoke truth to the powerful at their height, the great fear inducers.” This was a day after Rather had attended Tim Russert’s funeral and a day before he would head to the Gulf Coast to fish for speckled trout with his grandson. “There’s nothing professionally I like better than getting to the bottom of a big story. Short of the power of subpoena, and the pain of perjury, I’m doing all I can. Either you move forward and have the moxie, or...”—he collected himself. “I’m taking on a giant corporation; they spend their stockholders’ money. I had the guts to spend my own money and get to the bottom of this. That’s what that’s about.”

Last summer, Rather lived a kind of double life. When he was in New York he was often away from the office, meeting with attorneys or giving depositions. But then he’d “compartmentalize” and do journalism in bundles. In June alone, he traveled to the Galapagos to report a story on illegal shark-fin hunts; to Colombia, where he interviewed President Uribe about a free-trade agreement that’s in the works; and to Washington, where he met the Venezuelan ambassador and tried to arrange an interview with Hugo Chavez.

Later that same month, Rather and a producer, Mishi Ibrahim, went to Kansas City to report a story on a spate of exploding gas cans that Rather called “ticking time bombs.” The plastic gas cans had been manufactured without a flame arrester, a metal shield that could have stopped the vapor trails from backtracking, ignited, into the can, and Rather’s report, like many *Dan Rather Reports* stories, had a *60 Minutes* feel—a morality tale culminating in a moment of truth when, on cue, an expert (in this case Lori Hasselbring, a chemical engineer) demonstrates how a flame arrester could have prevented the gas cans from blowing up. This contradicted statements by the manufacturer, Blitz USA, and the primary distributor, Wal-Mart, that insisted such internal combustion wasn’t possible. If it wasn’t as glamorous as a confrontation with a president, it had a populist, investigative bent that Rather said brought its own kind of pleasure.

Rather has always seen himself as a reporter, and central to the narrative of his rebirth at HDNet is the notion that he is returning to his roots—he cut his teeth covering the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War for CBS—without the

political and bureaucratic obstacles of working within a huge corporation. "What we have to sell here is quality journalism," he told me. "We play no favorites. We pull no punches. What we have is absolute editorial freedom." Cuban added: "The show is a hundred percent his." To be sure, Cuban's management style is entirely hands-off, even when the heat comes down, as it did last year after *Reports* broke the story about potential safety problems with Boeing's new Dreamliner airplane (which the company subsequently delayed in bringing to market after trying to marginalize the story's main source, a former Boeing employee). The story generated considerable debate; *Wired's* science blog, for instance, questioned the veracity of the report, saying Rather had taken a "cheap shot" at Boeing by alleging that the composite material used in the plane's construction was likely to shatter and emit poisonous fumes on impact. "Perhaps this is part of an attempt by Rather to make a comeback after the debacle that resulted in his departure from CBS News," suggested Aaron Rowe, the author of the *Wired* post.

I was interested in what all this freedom meant to Rather, and so I went to Kansas City to meet him as he reported the gas-can story. HDNet's travel department was no match for the purchasing power at CBS, and declined to pay for his room at the posh InterContinental hotel. Instead, Rather flew to Texas and spent the night with family members, arriving in Kansas City early the following morning. Rather is keen on stealthy entries and exits (a hired car typically shuttles him promptly to and from secondary entrances), and though I kept a vigil from the lobby for his arrival, he managed to elude me. I ended up hearing him first—his familiar timbre resonating somewhere on the second floor, near where Ibrahim had commandeered a conference room for interviews.

In the conference room, Rather dutifully plied his star routine for a clearly star-struck audience. This included Hasselbring, the engineer, as well as Diane Breneman, an attorney for several people who had been burned by the exploding gas cans. During his interviews with Hasselbring and Breneman, Rather read questions prepared by Ibrahim, his producer, who sat behind a camera watching the proceedings play out and offering direction whenever Rather missed a beat. "I need Lori to explain the flammability range issue," she said at one point. "It's very rare you have the right combination of factors." Rather jotted down something on his note pad, and then repeated the question verbatim. Occasionally, Rather veered from the script and told a story or a joke. At one point, he commented on Breneman's shiny black heels, which she'd bought in New York City for the occasion. "I recognize all women's shoes," Rather said. "Back when I was a reporter in Houston, the murder capital of the USA, a detective once said of murder suspects, 'Show me their shoes, their women, and their cars.'" The reminiscence led him to describe his upbringing around "all these oil hands, who all had their sayings about women: 'Never drink with a tattooed woman called Tanker.' 'Never lay down with a woman who has more trouble than you do.'"

"We need to keep this going," Ibrahim said.

During a break, I asked Rather what he found so appealing about the gas-can story, which he'd previously suggested was

a perfect example of what made working at HDNet so rejuvenating. "Well, gasoline containers are killing and maiming people. There's a way to fix it. And it's not very expensive," he said. "The question to the powerful is, Why hasn't it been done? When we get to the end, there may be good answers. If so, we want to hear them. But up to now, by and large, the questions haven't been asked."

THE IDEA OF SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER, HOWEVER HACKNEYED that phrase has become, is in the DNA of all investigative journalism, but for Rather its significance can seem transcendent, even caricaturized. Rather's conception of the idea comes straight from Murrow, but the strain with which he often expressed it at CBS—brow furrowed, eyes urgent—speaks to the degree that being Dan Rather, anchor of CBS *Evening News*, constrained his ability to openly express it. The cult of Murrow, in general, translates discordantly these days—part of the success of *Good Night* is surely due to how improbable it all seems in today's media world—and for Rather the effect of his Murrow modeling was often that of supreme effort yielding mixed results. This is apparent in the episodes of questionable judgment and melodrama that punctuate his career—his domineering interview with vice president George H. W. Bush during Iran-Contra, for example, or his decision to walk off the set in protest of the U.S. Open's intrusion into his coverage of Pope John Paul II's visit to America. The interesting thing about Rather is that this tension arguably produced some of his best work. There is the sense, when watching the Bush interview, for example, of a man doing full battle with himself, straining to invoke some Murrowesque ideal in an era in which its meaning had been distorted. It makes for excellent TV:

BUSH: Let's be careful here.

RATHER: I want you to be careful.... I don't want to be argumentative, Mr. Vice President.

BUSH: (smirking) Yes you do, Dan.

To some extent, Rather's fate was a matter of timing. Soon after he took over the *Evening News* in 1981, the program underwent a full-scale conversion, as Van Gordon Sauter, the swashbuckling new president of CBS News, morphed the show from a straightforward presentation of headlines into an obsessively honed quest for viewers. "I got involved in research, in the interpretation of research, the advertising, the peripheral messages we conveyed, that Dan conveyed, the slogans we had, the graphics," Sauter told me. "It was very important to us because we had a change in image. As we were changing the broadcast we were changing the image of the broadcast, the image of CBS News." A few years later, this trend accelerated and expanded: the bottom-line-driven Lawrence Tisch took over CBS, the news division began to shrink, and the networks entered a destructive struggle with cable news that continues to this day.

Through all of this, there was the sense that the covenant between Rather and CBS meant different things to each party—that what was interpreted as a commodity by CBS was, for Rather, the essence of "tough journalism." "This is a guy

who they brought in to be the aggressor," a longtime colleague of Rather's told me. "Audiences always had a mixed reaction because he was so tough on presidents. There was nobody quite like him. CBS embraced that." Rather, meanwhile, never saw his aggressive style as maudlin or marketable; he simply saw it as being hard-nosed and driven to uncover truth—as being like Murrow. "People used to say, 'You need to stop thinking like a reporter and more like an anchor,'" he told me. "But my plan—and it worked—was to keep doing what had gotten me the job: reporter and anchor. I was a student of Murrow. He was a bold, vigorous investigative reporter. I knew—like Murrow knew—that you want to signal the viewer with a constant beacon that the person bringing you the news is passionately involved in gathering the news. On TV, if you're on every night, the audience will pick up who and what you are. It's a big mistake to hide that—they'll know. I wanted to keep the trust of the audience."

"Like Popeye, I yam what I yam."

IN 1958, MURROW DELIVERED A SPEECH TO THE RADIO and Television News Directors Association that presaged Rather's predicament, in which he chastised CBS for pandering to television's insulated masses after *See It Now* was removed, during a quiz-show craze, from its regular time slot and aired as a series of specials. The speech came to be seen as a warning about corporate excess. And by the time a clinically depressed Mike Wallace prepared to take the witness stand in 1985 to defend *60 Minutes* against accusations that its exposé, "The Uncounted Enemy," had libeled General William Westmoreland by accusing him of distorting the strength of Communist forces in Vietnam, the role of the correspondent was understood—at least within the entertainment companies that had swallowed TV news operations—to be of primary importance not for its journalistic prowess but for providing a handsome face to be exploited with close-ups and dramatic cuts in a postmodern form of debate. "It made Wallace crazy that George Crile, his producer, was the central defendant," said Lowell Bergman, who was Wallace's producer during *60 Minutes*'s next big scandal, involving a self-censored report on the Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corporation, depicted in the 1999 movie *The Insider* as proof of the destruction of the barrier between corporate and editorial. "It presented the reality that correspondents aren't reporters."

In his lawsuit, Rather both utilizes and eschews this "reality." He says he was off covering Hurricane Frances when crucial decisions were made about the National Guard story, thus distancing himself from its production, and yet claims the ensuing scandal hurt his reputation as a reporter. Following him around at HDNet, I saw this disconnect, between how Rather sees himself and how others see him, repeatedly on display. At a sold-out interview with Scott McClellan, the former Bush administration press secretary, at the Ninety-second Street Y in Manhattan, Rather's stature as a commodity on the anti-Bush front clearly fed the audience's bel-lows whenever McClellan said something juicy. On another occasion, after an interview with New York Congressman

There was a sense that what CBS interpreted as a commodity was, to Rather, the essence of 'tough journalism.'

Gary Ackerman about delays in resettling Iraqi refugees in America, the congressman's entire staff—interns, volunteers, secretaries—giddily gathered with Rather for a photo op.

In Kansas City, this paradox was driven home more directly. Rather had been introduced to the gas-can story by Mary Lyn Villanueva, the co-owner of Flagler Productions, a video production company based in Lenexa, outside of Kansas City. For more than twenty years, Flagler had been paid by Wal-Mart to record its executive events; when that handshake agreement was scuttled in 2006, Flagler (for whom the Wal-Mart contract tallied 95 percent of its income) was left all but bankrupt—until the company realized that its video library might fetch a tidy sum on the open market. After Wal-Mart declined to buy the library for \$150 million, Villanueva began leaking segments to the television media, hoping to create a market for her product (at \$250 per viewing hour) among attorneys engaged in a range of anti-Wal-Mart litigation. The videos—featuring cross-dressing executives slapping each others' rears, and a pep talk encouraging middle managers to bankroll the company's political action committee—became a cable-news sensation, most tellingly on CNBC, which promoted a segment with the news scroll, "Coming Up Next: Sex, Lies, and Videotape," then admitted: "Actually, there's no sex and lies, but there is videotape!"

The media swoon left Flagler disenchanted. "All they wanted were sound bites," said Villanueva, "but this was a far more serious issue than guys dancing in women's underwear." Flagler sought a more sober reporter to purchase exclusive rights to the library's crown jewels: a pair of videos in which Wal-Mart employees joked about the gas cans' propensity to blow up. Enter Rather, whose program had earlier used the Flagler tapes to produce a report, "Wal-Mart Goes to Washington," on the retailer's linking of donations by store managers to its corporate PAC to a safety-net initiative for its lowest-paid employees. I asked Villanueva, who is fifty, why she chose to place her company's best prospect for financial rebirth in the hands of an aging newsman who had been exiled from the mainstream for what some consider dereliction of duty. "I can't remember a time without Dan Rather being on TV," she said. "Back in the day, there were only three stations. Those were the icons. When things got tough in America, those were the people you trusted to deliver. He brings a lot of credibility—almost like family. In today's world, there's so much choice, so much spin. And I don't associate spin with Dan Rather." Then she got to a larger point. "We want this story to get lots of exposure. He is Dan Rather, and

he told us, once this story gets done, maybe he can go on *Larry King* or the *Today* show and generate some publicity."

It was interesting to hear Villanueva—someone unconcerned with the parochial fixations of Washington and Manhattan media cliques—home in on "exposure" and "publicity." In her calculated approach to professional salvation, she seemed to suggest an alternate, apolitical idea of Rather, based not on all the attempts to "understand" or vilify him (for example, Villanueva knew next to nothing about Rather's lawsuit), but on something more intriguing: the way, perhaps, that his omnipresence on television in the latter half of the twentieth century branded his visage upon the American psyche. Since 1979, each of Rather's contracts with CBS included an airtime provision, guaranteeing Rather a considerable amount of prime on-air spots, which was understood as dually beneficial: it increased Rather's exposure, the lifeblood of a television personality, while bolstering CBS News's credibility, since the anchor was its personification. As went the fortunes of Dan Rather, in other words, went the fortunes of CBS News. Indeed, the rulings thus far in Rather's lawsuit leave open the possibility that CBS owes Rather financial damages for breaking its fiduciary duty to him—an extra-contractual, symbiotic relationship based on loyalty and trust. This may help explain why CBS let twelve days pass after the *60 Minutes II* report on Bush aired before backtracking from its support of Rather and saying it couldn't guarantee the authenticity of the documents that indicated Bush got preferential treatment. "Rather was us," a longtime colleague of Rather's said to me. "We wanted to see him succeed, and we weren't into self-immolation."

It's worth noting that in the wake of General Westmoreland's 1982 libel case against CBS, the network assigned one of its own executive producers, Burton Benjamin, to investigate the alleged journalistic transgressions. In 2004, however, the network tapped two outsiders—former attorney general Dick Thornburgh and Louis Boccardi, the former head of The Associated Press—to investigate the Bush story. Their report is published on the Internet for all to see, while CBS had literally begged the presiding judge in the Westmoreland case to not release Benjamin's findings, calling them "oppressive."

The disparity underscores not only two vastly different media eras, but informs a final example of Rather's misreading of his place in the equation. During those awkward twelve days following the *60 Minutes II* piece, Rather reported on the fallout from his own story on the *Evening News*, announcing with a kind of stoic defiance that CBS would stand behind it, as it was based on "a preponderance of evidence." It is no surprise that Rather helped write the script for many of these shows; the theme is straight from Murrow. Once, during one of our interviews, Rather had mentioned a scene from *Good Night, and Good Luck* that spoke to his decision to defend the Bush piece even when the walls of his universe were crumbling. It concerned a story on Milo Radulovich, an Air Force reserve officer facing dismissal because of his father's alleged Communist sympathies. Shortly before the story was to air, an Air Force general and a lieutenant colonel came to visit Fred Friendly, the creator and producer of *See it Now*,

and pressured him not to run it. "He was cold steel to them," Rather said. "He listened, but he didn't give them an edge. 'Let's not have any misunderstanding,' he said. 'We're doing this piece. Murrow believes in it, you're not going to talk us out of it.'" Rather paused, and then said, "In the old way of doing things, management protected the talent."

THE GAS-CAN STORY CAME AND WENT ON HDNET; IN TERMS of buzz, a Google News search turns up little more than a few items on an anti-Wal-Mart blog that mentioned the manufacturer's nonchalant reaction and the fact that Wal-Mart seems to have no plans to pull the product from its shelves. In its finished form, the piece seems to go on and on in an anesthetized state, suggesting the burden of seriousness amid the overwhelming din of digital media. Meanwhile, in September, New York Supreme Court Judge Ira Gamerman dismissed Rather's fraud claims while allowing his breach-of-contract claim to continue. Thus truncated, even if a trial occurs, it remains to be seen the extent to which Rather will be able to introduce his larger ideological agenda about Viacom's meddling, or even to rehash certain details of the Bush story based on the new evidence Rather claims he has. Gamerman would likely have to create an exceptionally large evidentiary berth for Rather to broach all the First Amendment questions he says motivated the suit in the first place. His lawyers, though, maintain that CBS misrepresented the agenda of the Thornburgh-Boccardi investigation, which they call "a public administration gimmick to appease the Bush administration and throw Rather under the bus," and coerced Rather into not continuing to defend the story even though company officials knew there was more to it. Both could theoretically qualify as breaches of fiduciary duty—a claim likely to survive until the suit's bitter end—based on the expectation of mutual trust that Rather and CBS had developed over the years.

Last July, I was in court when Judge Gamerman issued perhaps the most favorable decision for Rather since his suit began, allowing his attorneys to depose nearly all of the major actors in the case. He alluded to a November trial date, suggesting a certain build-up of momentum. Rather attended this proceeding, entering the courtroom after the endless line of attorneys. He seemed cool and dispassionate, reacting more to Gamerman's contrarian angst than to the forward or backward sway of argument, which included an unsuccessful attempt by his attorney, Martin Gold, to have released to the media ten documents already produced in depositions that Gold said were "matters of national importance." A few days later, I received the second of two late-night telephone calls from Rather, and in talking about developments in the case, he passed along a gossip trail that seemed, to him, significant. "I hear a Hollywood producer is thinking about making a movie about all of this. I'm not surprised. You know, there have already been two recent movies about the inner workings of CBS. They both got nominated for an Oscar, and one made \$70 million." **CJR**

JESSE SUNENBLICK is a writer who lives in Brooklyn.





Ideas + Reviews

SECOND READ

Citizen Mailer

In his finest work, Norman Mailer applied subjective journalism to the powerful, and to himself

BY TOM PIAZZA

Early in Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History*, the poet Robert Lowell tells Mailer that he thinks of him as "the finest journalist in America." One writer's compliment is plainly another's backhanded insult. Mailer had a lifelong ambivalence about his reportorial, as opposed to his novelistic, work, considering fiction to be a higher calling. "There are days," Mailer responds, tartly, "when I think of myself as being the best writer in America."

A year after Mailer's death in November 2007, at eighty-four, maybe we can begin to be grateful that he worked both sides of the yard. He was always an interesting and ambitious novelist, yet Mailer's loyalties were divided between his fictive imagination and his fascination with the way society works. At his best, the two merged, and the results made for some of the most extraordinary writing of the postwar era.

When Mailer died, commentators lined up to bemoan the dearth of serious writers who, like Mailer, were willing to match their own egos, their own perceptions and sensibilities, against large contemporary events. We suffer from no shortage of gutsy reporters eager to cover trouble spots around the world. But rarely does that kind of journalistic impulse coexist with a personally distinct literary style, an ability to use one's own point of view as an entry into the reality of a subject. For Mailer, that subjectivity was not just a stylistic trait but a kind of ethical tenet, the door into a larger—he would call it novelistic—truth.

Mailer brought this approach to its peak in *The Armies of the Night*. His journalistic mock epic of the 1967 March on the Pentagon first appeared in *Harper's*, occupying the cover and taking up practically the entire issue, and came out in book form in the spring of 1968. By that time, the so-called New Journalism was in full bloom; Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese, Hunter S. Thompson, Joan Didion, George Plimpton, Truman Capote, and others had already done significant work, bringing highly individual styles and sensibilities to a form that had stubbornly held to its conventions of objectivity.

The Armies of the Night stood out from all their work in some important ways. Most New Journalism focused on a subculture—motorcycle gangs, hippies, Hollywood celebrity—and, by rendering it vividly, attempted to make inductive points about the larger culture. Mailer had a different approach. He got as close as he could to the gears of power, and then used his own sensibilities as a set of coordinates by which to measure the dimensions of people and events on the national stage: presidents and astronauts, championship fights and political conventions.

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He had shown this predilection before writing *Armies*. There was his *Esquire* article about John F. Kennedy at the 1960 Democratic convention, "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," and "In the Red Light," a piece on the 1964 Republican convention. There was also the audacious interstitial writing, addressed directly to Kennedy, the new president of the United States, in one of his most interesting and neglected books, *The Presidential Papers*. But in *Armies*, Mailer upped the ante by placing himself at the center of the narrative, turning himself into a self-dramatizing (in the purest sense of the phrase) protagonist. He gave his consciousness not just eyes but a face.

The book presents Mailer as a reluctant participant in a mass protest against the Vietnam War that took place in October 1967. A cast of extraordinary characters populates the stage—Robert Lowell, Dwight Macdonald, Paul Goodman, Ed DeGrazia—along with a secondary crew of protesters, marshals, homegrown Nazis, police, court bailiffs, and Mailer's fourth wife back in New York City. The author also manages to cram a lot of action into the short span of the narrative. He delivers a drunken speech on the eve of the march, attends a party full of liberal academics, consorts with Lowell, Macdonald, William Sloane Coffin Jr., and other notables gathered for the march, participates in the protest itself, gets arrested, and spends the night in jail.

The publication of the first part of the book in *Harper's* created a sensation. A month later, the book's second part, a shorter and more formal account of the planning and execution of the march, was published in *Commentary*. They were combined in the finished volume, to which Mailer appended his subtitle, *History as a Novel, the Novel as History*. It was immediately and almost universally recognized as a "triumph," to use Dwight Macdonald's word, and went on to win both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize.

MAILER'S MOST SIGNIFICANT DISCOVERY in *Armies* was the technique of writing about himself in the third person, as if he were a character in a novel. "Norman Mailer," the character, is treated as

a mock-heroic protagonist making his way through a complex network of competing interests and sensibilities during that weekend in Washington. Because we get a vivid sense of him early on, we gladly accept the topspin he puts on his perceptions as he serves them up.

He earns a powerful narrative leverage, starting with the very first sentence. "From the outset," he writes, "let us bring you news of your protagonist." This lone sentence is followed by an extended excerpt from *Time's* snarky report on Mailer's pre-protest monologue at the Ambassador Theater.

It is a shrewd and effective opening gambit. There is a clearly stated "us" and "you," so an immediate dramatic relation is set up between the narrative voice and the reader. The voice is bringing us "news"—we love news!—and it is about "your" protagonist, drawing us into a subliminal complicity. Within a page we learn that the "us" who is bringing the news is, in fact, our protagonist himself, a man of many parts, apparently, perhaps containing Whitmanesque multitudes.

The *Time* excerpt is studded with value judgments masquerading as straight reporting: the upcoming march is referred to as "Saturday's capers," and Dwight Macdonald, who shared the stage with Mailer, is "the bearded literary critic." When the excerpt is done, Mailer quits this curtain-raiser with a single sentence, "Now we may leave *Time* in order to find out what happened." We are hooked. And we have been introduced to the book's underlying principle: the notion that a reporter who is willing to characterize events without first characterizing himself or herself is inherently suspect. One can't approach the truth without first turning an eye on one's own subjectivity.

The second chapter, the book's official beginning, puts this principle into practice immediately. "On a day somewhat early in September," the narrative begins, "the year of the first March on the Pentagon, 1967, the phone rang one morning and Norman Mailer, operating on his own principle of war games and random play, picked it up. This was not characteristic of Mailer. Like most people whose nerves are sufficiently sensitive to keep them well-covered with flesh, he detested the telephone.

Taken in excess, it drove some psychic equivalent of static into the privacies of the brain."

Since we know that we are hearing this from Mailer himself, we are, again, complicit in the narrative; a game is in progress, and we are being shown the rules. We are going to get our events via a mind that is nothing if not subjective, and yet paradoxically objective about its own subjectivity. We will get descriptions of action (he picks up the ringing phone), background context for the action (it was not characteristic), observations delivered from an unexpected angle with a Mark-of-Zorro flourish (the oversensitive nerves with their sheathing of flesh), and an insistence on sharp detail in metaphor (the static being driven into "the privacies of the brain"). The author will juggle these ingredients in quick succession, always with huge linguistic gusto.

Mailer's prose obsessively amends its own perceptions, makes parenthetical observations, qualifies, anticipates, demurs, constantly tries to stand outside itself. He was, in fact, a species of performance artist, discovering metaphors en route and mingling them with dazzling audacity. Here he is, riffing on his discomfort at a party thrown by some liberal backers of the march: "The architecture of his personality bore resemblance to some provincial cathedral which warring orders of the church might have designed separately over several centuries.... Boldness, attacks of shyness, rude assertion, and circumlocutions tortured as arthritic fingers working at lace, all took their turn with him, and these shuttlings of mood became most pronounced in their resemblance to the banging and shunting of freight cars when he was with liberal academics." If your sensibilities are ruffled by a mixed metaphor, comic grandiosity, or long sentences, steer clear of Mailer.

Through it all, Mailer is crucially aware not just of his own motivations, but of how they might play to the public. "Mailer," he writes, "had the most developed sense of image; if not, he would have been a figure of deficiency, for people had been regarding him by his public image since he was twenty-five years old. He had, in fact, learned to live in the sarcophagus of his image—at

In every sense—stylistic, cultural, political—Mailer was stretched between two worlds. Never programmatic enough for the Old Left, neither was he ever anarchic enough to fully sign on to the New Left's Grand Guignol.

night, in his sleep, he might dart out, and paint improvements on the sarcophagus. During the day, while he was helpless, newspapermen and other assorted bravos of the media and literary world would carve ugly pictures on the living tomb of his legend."

One would be tempted to find a new name for this point of view—first person third, perhaps—and think of it as a technical innovation, but for two facts. Mailer winks at the first of these facts upon awakening in his hotel, the Hay-Adams, on the morning of the march, then never mentions it again. "One may wonder," he writes, "if the Adams in the name of his hotel bore any relation to Henry." Yes, one may, but nobody need wonder afterward where Mailer got the idea of writing about himself in the third person. By alluding to the author of *The Education of Henry Adams*, Mailer tips his hat, and his hand, to his fellow Harvard alumnus and consummate insider/outsider. *The Education*, published in 1918, may lack Mailer's bravado and sheer joy in language, but it does use the same first-person-third technique to locate its author in an ambiguous social and historical position. (Adams's book, by the way, also won a Pulitzer, presented posthumously in 1919.)

The other fact is that innovations, if they are indeed innovations, typically spawn techniques useful to succeeding practitioners of the form. But the technique of *The Armies of the Night* is so completely suffused with Mailer's personality, his peculiar mix of ego and charm, of self-regard and self-deprecation, his intelligence and occasional clumsiness, that subsequent attempts

by other writers to use the first person third have inevitably read as embarrassing, inadvertent homages.

MAILER RECOGNIZED EARLY ON, BEFORE a lot of writers, that politics—most of contemporary public life, in fact—was turning into a kind of theater. Actions on the political stage had a symbolic weight that often outbalanced what might previously have been thought of as their practical consequences. This development was the wedge that eventually drove an unbridgeable divide between the Old Left, with its programmatic preoccupations and endless appetite for dogma, and the New Left, with its vivid sense of the theatrical. It was also the subtext of the 1967 march. The real dynamics of public life were shifting away from the old tabulations of political give-and-take. Instead, the cut of a candidate's suit or the unfortunate presence of his five o'clock shadow would travel out over the television sets of the nation and affect people's perceptions on a level that bypassed any substantial argument.

The media, to use Mailer's terminology, were driving public events deeper and deeper into the "privacies" of every citizen's brain, short-circuiting linear thinking in favor of image-driven manipulation. And this was precisely why traditional reportage had become ill-equipped for locating the truth of "what happened." What we needed, insisted Mailer, was a different approach: "The novel must replace history at precisely that point where experience is sufficiently emotional, spiritual, psychological, moral, existential, or supernatural

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to expose the fact that the historian in pursuing the experience would be obliged to quit the clearly demarcated limits of historic inquiry." His book, he adds, "while still written in the cloak of an historic style, and, therefore, continuously attempting to be scrupulous to the welter of a hundred confusing and opposed facts, will now unashamedly enter that world of strange lights and intuitive speculation that is the novel."

Needless to say, this development dovetailed perfectly with Mailer's own impulses. And yet (and this is perhaps Mailer's most important saving grace), he was deeply ambivalent about it. Highly sensitive to the theater of events and personae, Mailer was alive to the ways in which the manipulation of surfaces could, and would, be used to deaden the public's ability to think, to sift and evaluate information. Writers, public officials, advertising people, politicians, speech writers—all were in possession of a dangerous weapon, and they were obliged to use it with singular care. "Style," Mailer wrote, much later, in an introduction to a book by Carl Oglesby, a former member of Students for a Democratic Society, about the JFK assassination, "is not the servant of our desire to inform others how to think, but the precise instrument by which we attempt to locate the truth."

In the light of today's endemic spin, such a sentiment would seem a touching artifact of a simpler time, if it weren't so achievable by any individual sitting alone in a room trying to locate the truth. The prerequisite is the sense that it is both possible and desirable. Citizen Mailer turns the act of seeing, the workings of consciousness itself, into the ultimate civic act—a responsibility shared by everyone in the privacies of his or her brain. There is something profoundly democratic in his insistence that the individual's sensibility could meet the largest events on equal terms, with one's own centering and irreducible humanity as the common denominator.

AS A WRITER AND AS A MAN, MAILER was always in a state of tension. His mind and heart were planted in a wholly American flux—improvisatory, protean, deeply ambiguous in intention, supremely egotistical and supremely

civic-minded. These tensions give his work its deepest dynamism, turning it into a theater of opposing psychic forces. At the same time, Mailer was not quite a wholly American spirit. Or perhaps his Americanness existed in extraordinary tension with his respect for European intellectual and artistic traditions. When, toward the end of *Advertisements for Myself*, he promises to write a novel worthy of being read by "Dostoevsky and Marx; Joyce and Freud; Stendhal, Tolstoy, Proust and Spengler; Faulkner, and even old moldering Hemingway," 80 percent of the honor roll has been read before an American is mentioned.

Mailer retained an almost sentimental attachment to the novel form, yet his major gift was not the ability to imagine living, three-dimensional fictional characters. What he did have a genius for was dramatized dialectic. He loved to interview himself; his 1966 collection *Cannibals and Christians* contains three self-interviews, and more followed through the years. The form of *Armies* is itself a kind of dialogue, in two halves, between two different modes of discourse.

In every sense—stylistic, cultural, political—he was stretched between two worlds. Never programmatic enough for the Old Left, neither was he ever anarchic enough to fully sign on to the New Left's Grand Guignol. Although at times Mailer liked to characterize himself as the Devil (or at least a devil) while criticizing America's "Faustian" ambitions, he was far from Goethe's "spirit that negates." Rather, he found in his own Hebraic, and specifically Talmudic, tradition (his grandfather was a rabbi), perhaps his deepest conviction: the sense that there is something central, necessary, and even sacred in doubt, in the nuanced weighing of competing intellectual and moral and spiritual claims. And this allowed him to put his own ego, his outsized talents, his brilliance and narcissism, in the service of a higher calling. Because of that, *The Armies of the Night* remains one of the most enlivening, and most deeply American, testaments ever written. **CJR**

TOM PIAZZA is author of the novel *City of Refuge* and the nonfiction book *Why New Orleans Matters*, as well as the winner of a Grammy Award for his notes to Martin Scorsese Presents the Blues: A Musical.

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Absolutely Sensational!

The rise and fall and rise of the tabloid press

BY ANDIE TUCHER

IN HIS ENTERTAINING BUT SLAPDASH new biography of Generoso Pope Jr., who shepherded the tabloid *National Enquirer* to a circulation peak of over five million in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Jack Vitek entices readers as skillfully as any headline writer in the heyday of Florida's "Tabloid Triangle." And he, too, sometimes puts more tease than meat into his prose. Vitek, a former journalist who teaches journalism and English at Edgewood College in Madison, Wisconsin, likes to backpedal away from his own bombshells. That leads to the following disclosures about the man who, Vitek admits up front, had a "dull lifestyle" and a "dour personality."

Pope might have had Asperger's syndrome, but that tells us more about the syndrome than the man. Because he probably had Mafia connections, Pope might have attended the funeral of the mobster Frank Costello, but no one knows for sure. Pope invented modern tabloid culture, except that in all his years as editor, he wrote hardly a word of copy, nearly all of his editorial decisions were "intuitive" or "arbitrary," and he didn't like celebrity stories but ran them because otherwise readers stopped buying. If he hadn't died in 1988, Pope might have thought of ways to boost the paper's cratering circulation in the difficult 1990s, or the tabloidization of the mainstream press might have made that impossible.

And last but not least: Pope was as influential a newspaperman as Joseph Pulitzer, except that Pope couldn't have cared less about politics, social change, progress, or truth, and provided only "cheap, even mean pleasures" that distracted readers from more serious concerns. On the other hand, he never hurt anybody.

Vitek certainly deserves credit for his persistence in pursuing so inhospitable a biographical subject. Pope left behind so little evidence illuminating his ideas or inner life—so little evidence that he even *had* an inner life—that some speculation is inevitable. It may also be inevitable that although Pope gets top billing in the title, his much more colorful newspaper turns out to be the star of the book. Based in part on his interviews with the seventeen employees, from executive editors to the accountant and the gardener, whom he lists in his source notes, Vitek presents a rousing if somewhat disorganized picture of life backstage at Pope's tabloids.

The Godfather of Tabloid: Generoso Pope Jr. and the National Enquirer

By Jack Vitek
University Press of Kentucky
290 pages, \$29.95

The Flash Press: Sporting Male Weeklies in 1840s New York

By Patricia Cline Cohen, Timothy J. Gilfoyle, and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz
University of Chicago Press
278 pages, \$20

Much of the material about both the man and his paper is familiar. Pope's father, who came to New York from Naples with little money and less English, ended up the owner of the influential daily *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* and a wheeler-dealer in local politics. The son had a privileged childhood; his classmates at the Horace Mann School included the likes of Si Newhouse and Roy Cohn, who became a close friend. After young Gene's graduation from MIT in 1946, his father made him editor and publisher of the family newspaper. Gene Pope broke with his family, however, and in 1952, probably with financial help from Cohn and Costello, he bought the fading twenty-six-year-old Hearst-backed *New York Enquirer*.

For the first dozen or so years, Pope concentrated on gore, scandal, mystery, and freaks, including the archetypal 1963 story about the murder of an Olympic skier, I CUT OUT HER HEART AND STOMPED ON IT! But when circulation stalled, Pope hit on a new strategy: he changed the paper's main fare from sleaze to celebrity gossip, which could be marketed without shame at any grocery store and tossed with the Cocoa Puffs into any shopping cart. His success inspired imitators, including the Canadian owner of two tabloids who followed Pope to Florida to start his third, and Rupert Murdoch, who founded the *Star* as a direct competitor. And in 1979, when Pope bought new color presses for the *Enquirer*, he started a second paper of his own, the *Weekly World News*, to keep the old monochrome presses busy and absorb the goofier tales of space aliens, miracles, and "Bat Boy" that didn't quite make the grade for its sister publication.

Vitek gives due attention to the landmark moments in his saga. There is the invasion of the Fleet Streeters, British and Australian reporters who imported their raucous style to sunny southern Florida. The investigative exposure of the contents of Henry Kissinger's "stolen" trash bags (unopened cans of soup and Maalox wrappers). The Carol Burnett libel suit. The Elvis-in-his-coffin photo, which a picture editor insists was "retouched" but not faked. The million-dollar Christmas tree set up every year on the company's grounds, which never

quite made it into the record books as the tallest. Oddly, however, Vitek quotes so sparingly from actual *Enquirer* articles that the reader has to wonder how many issues he's seen for himself.

By the time Pope died in 1988, circulation figures for all the supermarket tabloids were declining, and a series of ownership changes ended with all six papers in the hands of a single company. Even though the *Enquirer* has repeatedly inspired bouts of everything from awe to disgust by scooping the mainstream press on its home turf—from Gary Hart's monkey business to O. J. Simpson's disavowed shoes, and recently Bristol Palin's pregnancy—its survival is very much in doubt, while the *Weekly World News* now publishes online only.

It's a lively story, sometimes a juicy one. But Vitek's insistence that Pope "invented and fostered the ever-widening brand of tabloid culture" that has "spread far beyond the grocery check-out counter into nearly all other forms of our popular media" turns out to be about as persuasive as the latest sighting of Elvis at Starbucks. Vitek joins many other observers in suggesting that the supermarket tabloids were doomed by the diminishing differences between themselves and the rest of the media. Given the proliferation of slick gossip magazines like *People* and *Us Weekly*, the increasing attention paid by television to reality, celebrities, and bleeding-lead local news, the gossip-loving ethos of the Internet, and the pressures on the mainstream media to competitively cover the kind of story that requires, say, the words "President Clinton's penis" to appear on the front page, the *Enquirer* has surely lost its monopoly on melodrama, sensation, and scandal.

It's hard to argue with that assessment. But to give Pope credit for inventing the vulgarity of American media is both over-enthusiastic and historically shortsighted. Ever since Gutenberg, societies have been creating—and eventually rejecting or absorbing—some form of what they would recognize as their own "modern tabloid culture." I'm thinking, for instance, of the celebrity-mad and media-rich 1920s, when the *New York Daily News* splashed on its front page a hidden-camera photograph of a condemned murderess at the moment of her



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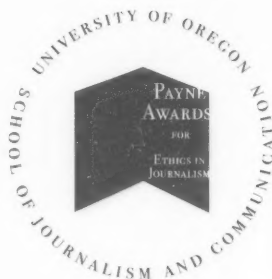


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death in the electric chair. The *New York Evening Graphic* gained fame for its faked "composograph" photos illustrating, for instance, the notorious divorce trial of teenaged "Peaches" from middle-aged "Daddy" Browning by showing the two in bed. A combination of mainstream public protest and the sobering realities of the Depression eventually cleaned up the *News* and killed the *Graphic*.

Simply crediting Pope with a creation myth is also a much less interesting way to think about the evolution, functions, and particular appeal of the sensational media. It ignores the ways that tabloids and other lurid or gossipy entertainments have always been shaped by their culture as much as, or even more than, they themselves shape it. It also ignores the intricate dance (sometimes tango, sometimes hoedown) they often perform with their audiences, their critics, and "respectable" society.

At times, in fact, sensation is in the eye of the retrospective observer. In seventeenth-century New England, pamphlets and almanac pages describing the same kinds of strange occurrences that fill the modern tabloids—crimes, earthquakes, celestial phenomena, monstrous births—were common fare, but they weren't (or weren't *mainly*) for titillation. The historian David Paul Nord has argued that in an era with no conventional newspapers, and in a society that believed that all events were directly ordained by God for the instruction and improvement of humankind, people took such items seriously: they treated them as pieces of public information containing directions on how to live in a manner acceptable to their Lord.

Often the job of the sensational press has been to test and define the ever-changing boundaries between what's acceptable to a society and what's not. William Randolph Hearst seemed to be taking that challenge as his personal mandate, earning both huge circulations and steady criticism with newspapers that were "like a screaming woman running down the street with her throat cut," as longtime reporter Arthur Pegler put it. (Pegler, father of the right-wing columnist Westbrook Pegler, knew what he was talking about: he once planted a bottle of arsenic in the basement of a murder suspect to scoop the competition.)

But having gotten away with the frenzied hyping of such stories as the case of the dismembered masseur and the rescue by Hearst's own reporters of a young Cuban woman held by "lustful" Spanish jailers, the publisher took a step too far. His *Journal* printed a verse and an editorial broadly suggesting the assassination of the "spineless" President McKinley some months before an anarchist would do just that. Even though no one seriously believed that the *Journal* had inspired the assassin, who couldn't even English, the public's disgust forced Hearst to temper his excesses for a while.

And even some of the publications furthest on the fringe could play important if controversial social roles. A provocative example is the largely forgotten genre known as the "flash press," which flourished briefly in New York in the early 1840s. Bearing names like the *Libertine*, the *Rake*, the *Flash*, and the *Whip*, and generally hawked in male preserves like oyster bars and barbershops, these weeklies devoted themselves to racy stories and gossip about crime, theater, sport, scandal, and sex. So thoroughly and swiftly were they repudiated by mainstream society that very few copies survive; the only significant library collection is held by the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts.

The scandal sheets are deeply analyzed and copiously excerpted in the splendid new volume *The Flash Press*—the work of Patricia Cline Cohen, Timothy J. Gilfoyle, and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, three scholars who have written widely on the seedier side of life in antebellum New York. And yes, the flash papers were undeniably smutty. Readers were regaled with naughty woodcut illustrations of louché men and loose women. The papers also offered guided tours of the city's best brothels, descriptions of its most popular prostitutes, accounts of divorce proceedings and notorious adultery cases, and gossip columns that posed ribald questions about the rumored misdeeds of people only thinly disguised as "J—S—" or the "old lecher from Bond Street." Blackmail seems to have been a standard practice among the flash editors.

Yet these admittedly pornographic papers left a lasting imprint on the law, the sensational press, and politics. On

the one hand, they aroused such general indignation as to inspire a novel legal strategy. Like most states at the time, New York had no laws against obscenity. Prosecutors invoked the English common-law tradition to haul the editors into court—in fact, the Antiquarian Society's collection includes copies marked up by the district attorney for use as trial evidence. Several of the flash editors ended up among the first Americans ever convicted and imprisoned on charges of obscene libel. And *The Flash Press* argues that these cases later served as important precedents to establish the constitutionality of the 1873 Comstock Act for the suppression of "obscene literature and articles of immoral use."

On the other hand, the flash editors were purposefully elbowing their way into the ongoing public debate about not only sex and gender but also other hot-button issues of the antebellum era: egalitarianism, individual freedom, evangelical religion, the dangers and opportunities of urban life. With tongue in cheek, the editors often used the righteous language of religious and moral reformers to justify their exploration of sexual topics. Their purpose, they insisted, was to reform the public's morals by showing, as explicitly as possible, how immoral it truly was. But with cheerful inconsistency, they also celebrated male heterosexual license as a kind of "libertine republicanism," an expression of individual liberty rooted in the seizure of privileges once reserved for the elite. The obscenity convictions of the flash papers effectively severed the link they had forged between pornography and politics; in the aftermath, dirty literature was simply dirty.

Vitek's book is a readable and lively (if hyperbolic) introduction to the colorful empire of a rather pallid man. Yet a comparison with *The Flash Press* makes clear how relatively shallow are the scholarly insights of *The Godfather of Tabloid*. It's as if Vitek had managed to dig up Kissinger's Maalox wrappers but Cohen, Gilfoyle, and Horowitz were the ones who figured out what had given the honorable secretary his indigestion. **CJR**

ANDIE TUCHER, the author of *Froth and Scum*, a book about the Penny Press, teaches at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism.

All in the Family

The Bacardi saga encapsulates Cuba's turbulent history

BY MIRTA OJITO

OVER THE YEARS, I'VE HAD MY SHARE of Cuba Libres, the cocktail Americans know as rum-and-Coke and many Cuban exiles know as "mentirita," or little lie because Cuba isn't free and hasn't been for a long time. Yet I never knew where it came from. Who mixed it first? And, more relevant perhaps, who was the optimist who named it?

After reading Tom Gjelten's gem of a book, *Bacardi and the Long Fight for Cuba*, I still don't know the answers to those questions. And neither does the author, a correspondent for National Public Radio. But the origin of the Cuba Libre may be the only detail of the Bacardi family, its prized rum production, and the last 148 years of Cuban history that Gjelten doesn't know. Everything else—from the price of molasses in the 1850s to the intricacies of U.S. laws regarding commerce with Castro's Cuba—he has investigated, digested, and delivered in a highly readable and impeccably researched book.

In Gjelten's recounting, the legend of the first Cuba Libre goes like this: one day, an inspired Havana bartender mixed some Bacardi rum with Coke and offered it to his American customers, a group of soldiers, with a toast: "¡Por Cuba Libre!" ("To a Free Cuba!") The soldiers repeated the phrase, and the name stuck.

The story comes from a former Bacardi advertising chief in New York City. That, as the author concedes, "raises questions" about the authenticity of an admittedly "good tale." But a good tale bears repeating.

THERE MAY NOT BE A BETTER TALE THAN THE STORY OF THE BACARDI FAMILY to convey the broader, messier, and infinitely sadder story of Cuba. At least one member of the Bacardi family seems to have been involved in every major and sometimes minor development in Cuba's history since the mid-1800s. Indeed, members of the family were instrumental in helping to turn the island of Cuba into a nation. It was, in Gjelten's description, a flawed and weak nation—but nonetheless, one where blacks and whites together rose against four hundred years of Spanish domination; where the patriotic and the enlightened, the rich and the poor, rejected U.S. intervention more than a century ago; and where, in the late 1950s, the upper class helped to bring about a revolution that then turned around and confiscated its businesses and bank accounts, pushing more than one million people into exile.

Bacardi and the Long Fight for Cuba: The Biography of a Cause

By Tom Gjelten
Viking
480 pages, \$27.95

With a steady hand, superb reporting, and exquisite storytelling, Gjelten takes us from the dirty streets of Santiago, where the Bacardi family saga began, to the posh hotels where Mafia bosses plied their trade in 1950s Havana. From there, he moves on to the upheaval of exile in Miami and to the halls of the U.S. Congress and courthouses, where the Bacardi company has more recently defended its claim as the only legitimate manufacturer of Cuban rum—even though its product has not been produced in Cuba since 1960 and is identified on the label as "Puerto Rican Rum." No detail of the island's twisted history escapes the author's discerning and dissecting journalistic eye.

Gjelten states in the preface that his book has a dual purpose: to provide a "nuanced view of the nation's experience over the last century and a half" and to give voice to the exiles who "deserve to have their contributions recognized, if only to understand why so many became so angry." It's rare to find a journalist who admits that his book has an agenda. And at first, it's easy to distrust Gjelten because of it. But his stated purpose is so well handled and so thoroughly documented, that it becomes the book's greatest strength.

The author is also right to ascribe such centrality to the Bacardis: their family saga helps us to understand Cuban history in a fresh and seamless way. We know these tales, we've heard them before, but no one has told them better and more cohesively than Gjelten.

The Bacardi company was founded in 1862 by Facundo Bacardi, an astute and prudent Catalan merchant, who, as many Spaniards did at the time, deftly negotiated dual loyalties: to Cuba and to the Spanish crown. But Gjelten focuses much of his historical narrative on Emilio Bacardi and José Pepin Bosch, two outsized personalities who came in his wake, and took the Bacardi company to unimagined levels of relevance and success.

Emilio Bacardi, Facundo's oldest son, was an enlightened and educated man who wrote novels, opposed slavery, sent two of his daughters to the progressive Raja Yoga School in California, questioned the divinity of Jesus, and saw the Roman Catholic Church as an arm of

JAN BUTCHOFKY-HOUSER / CORBIS

Spanish repression. In retirement, he kept busy by compiling a ten-volume collection of news, anecdotes, and official notices, titled *Crónicas de Santiago de Cuba*, a classic work.

Pepín Bosch entered the story later, when he married one of Emilio's granddaughters. To him fell the task of globalizing the company and rebuilding it. Bosch, only the third man to lead Bacardi, held on to this job for more than thirty years, retiring in 1976. Headquartered in Bermuda, Bacardi today is a thriving multinational, which produces whiskey, gin, vermouth, vodka, tequila, and, of course, rum.

Gjelten is at his best when he leaves aside the intricacies of running a business and returns to the intersection of the family with the greater currents of Cuban history. One can almost imagine

him yelping with joy as he discovers yet another connection.

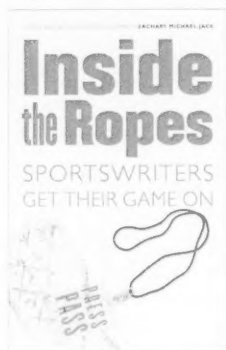
To wit: Emilio Bacardi knew José Martí, the poet and national martyr. His son "Emilito" fought alongside the great Antonio Maceo—a mulatto so fierce in battle that he was known as the Bronze Titan. For a brief period, Pepín Bosch ran Cuba's Finance Ministry as well as the company. The clan was also connected to Desi Arnaz (of *I Love Lucy* fame), since his grandfather had been a Bacardi executive and sponsored the company of the world-famous ballerina Alicia Alonso. In the late 1950s, Bacardi women knitted hats and socks for the rebels who were fighting the U.S.-backed dictator, Fulgencio Batista. Vilma Espín, the daughter of a Bacardi executive and stockholder, married Raúl Castro, Cuba's current president,

in 1959. That same year, Bosch was the only businessman to accompany Fidel Castro on his first, quasi-official trip to the United States.

Throughout it all—family tragedies, an earthquake, devastating fires, plagues, wars, prison, and exile at various times to different countries—the Bacardis managed to keep their company intact. The family ran such a tight, civic-minded, and profitable business, as Gjelten repeatedly reminds us, that they were untouchable. Through good times and bad, everyone drank rum. The business simply couldn't lose—until Castro came to power, that is. In 1960, a group of armed milicianos showed up at the Bacardi offices in Havana and asked a thirty-year-old sales manager, the most senior employee on duty that morning, to hand over the keys. The

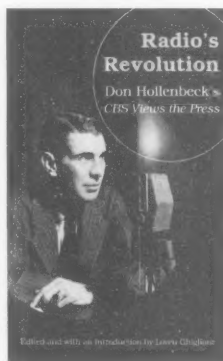


Cuba Libre The Bacardi building in downtown Havana.



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sales manager complied, then asked for a receipt. "I have to have something to show my boss," he told the soldiers. Accountants estimated that the company's seized properties amounted to about \$76 million in 1960 dollars.

Once the book shifts focus to the Miami exiles, Gjelten's writing becomes even tighter. At one point, he packs two decades of history into two paragraphs. In the same chapter, he uses a 1984 commentary written by Bosch in a Miami newspaper to highlight the contradictions of being an anti-Castro exile and a progressive thinker—a duality that few non-Cuban reporters have ever fully grasped. In the piece, Bosch criticized President Ronald Reagan's economic policies, even though most Cuban exiles—himself included—were enamored of Reagan's foreign policies. He wrote: "It seems to me that Mr. Reagan should impose on the rich the same sacrifices he is obliging the rest of the society to suffer. So far, this government has not caused me any sacrifice whatsoever.... To me, this doesn't seem right."

The quote, which may lose some of its pathos in translation, points to a little recognized fact: Miami Cubans are not all obsessed with Fidel, money, and power, in that order. Just as they were more than fifty years ago on the island, Cubans in the United States remain preoccupied with issues of social justice, democracy, and wealth distribution. And, of course, Fidel.

The book has a few weak spots. Gjelten fails to fully explore why Bosch, who dedicated his entire life to Bacardi, would suddenly resign over a management spat, then sell 12 percent of the company to a competitor. And the author may seem a bit naïve when he says that Bacardi's ingenious advertising campaigns were designed "to make Cubans feel good about themselves and proud of their nation, even while dancing the night away." (I think the Bacardis most likely just wanted to sell rum.) There is also the repeated assertion of what a great manager Bosch was. When, on page 254, Gjelten salutes him as a "classic enterprise leader" who "moved boldly, managed risk, and responded creatively to business setbacks," I found myself writing "Enough!" in the margin.

But these are minor issues. What matters is that Gjelten has managed to capture in a single book almost all that one needs to know of Cuban history. His exhaustive reporting allowed him to delve deeply into the Cuban character and soul and reach conclusions that many Cubans will not like to hear, but which are nevertheless true.

"A readiness to resort to violence in pursuit of political aims was part of the national culture in Cuba," Gjelten writes. He goes on to note that "the anti-Castro movement was characterized by petty internal rivalries, in a pattern reminiscent of the way Cuba's political parties had fragmented in previous decades and made dictatorships possible. Finally, the opposition was tainted by its close association with the U.S. government, another longstanding issue in Cuba's uneven political development."

All so true.

It is easy to conclude, as a U.S. general notes toward the end of Cuba's Independence War, that Cubans are "incapable of creating a viable government." Gjelten quotes him as an example of the scorn and weird paternalism that Americans felt toward the island at the turn of the twentieth century. A wealthy island—the wealthiest Spanish colony—in the hands of a people too easily impressed by Caudillos can be a corrosive, self-destructive combination, as history has proven time and time again.

Yet Gjelten ends the book on a positive note. He returns to the example of Emilio Bacardi, whom he calls "a wise man who always counseled against despair," and suggests that in the post-Castro era, Cubans should be able to find the president they deserve. A wise man himself, the author stops short of predicting the future. On the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the so-called Cuban revolution, there is still no clear road for the future of a nation that emerged from conflict more than a century ago and that remains mired in a soul-crushing regime with no ideological compass and no other purpose than sustaining its own survival. **CJR**

MIRTA OJITO is an assistant professor at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism and the author of *Finding Mañana: A Memoir of a Cuban Exodus*. She shared a Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting in 2001.

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

BY JAMES BOYLAN

The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America

By Susan Wise Bauer
Princeton University Press
352 pages, \$26.95

WE ARE LIVING, WRITES Susan Wise Bauer, in an Age of Public Confession, now at least forty years in duration. Confession, she makes clear, differs from apology. Apology is easy ("I am sorry"), but confession is hard ("I am sorry because I did wrong")—and Bauer is interested only in confessions involving predatory sexual transgression. With the exception of radio evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson, the fallen in *The Art of the Public Grovel* are men. Bauer scarcely distinguishes between political and religious sinners, seeing them all as moral leaders called to abase themselves before their followers. Some can pull it off and continue their public lives; some cannot.

The list is a depressing commentary on the character of leadership in the recent era, rife as it is with egotists and even frauds. It runs from Ted Kennedy at Chappaquiddick through the televangelists Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart to Bill Clinton and Cardinal Bernard Law (who sinned by coddling the sinful among his priests). Poor Jimmy Carter gets dragged along for his ill-considered remark to *Playboy* about lust in his heart. And time ran out before Bauer could get to, for example, Senator Larry Craig and former presidential candidate John Edwards.

Bauer sees religious confessions as partly political, and political confessions as partly religious. "In Bill Clinton's America," she writes, "the intersection of Protestant practice, therapeutic technique, and talk-show ethics was complete." She also discusses at length the differing developments of Protestant (public) and Roman Catholic (private) confessional traditions. This divergence made it all but impossible for Cardinal Law and Ted Kennedy to manage a successful public confession, while Bill Clinton, accustomed to the public acknowledgment of sin, said what needed to be said and moved on.

Bauer notes in passing a critical element in all of these dramas—the news media, which were often not only the whistleblowers but the enforcers, deciding whether a given confession had made the grade. *The Boston Globe* held Cardinal Law's feet to the fire. Jim Bakker, as Bauer notes, came to regard the *Charlotte Observer* as his chief antagonist, and his fatal lapse lay in confessing to the *Observer* rather than to his own congregation. Not that the media verdict always carried the day. Much of the press called on Bill Clinton to resign after the release of his grand-jury testimony in the Lewinsky case; he stayed on and outlasted the scandal.

As a bonus, Bauer appends the texts of statements by six confessors. Connoisseurs of venial sin will want to compare and contrast.

Obscene in the Extreme: The Burning and Banning Of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*

By Rick Wartzman
Public Affairs
308 pages, \$26.95

RICK WARTZMAN'S *OBSCENE in the Extreme* is much more than a conventional book-banning saga. It richly chronicles one of the epic tales of the 1930s, the struggle between left and right, hired hands and big farmers, migrant Okies and natives, in the towns and fields of California.

In the spring of 1939, John Steinbeck published *The Grapes of Wrath*, his novel about the fictional Joad family's trek from Oklahoma to California—specifically to the labor camps and squatter settlements of Kern County at the southern end of the San Joaquin Valley. The book became an instant best-seller, and went on to win the Pulitzer Prize the next year.

In Kern County, however, which was dominated by the powerful Associated Farmers, Steinbeck's novel was hardly welcome. On August 21, 1939, the county board of supervisors adopted a resolution removing the book from the public library and the schools. The book's "obscurity" was the pretext, although little of Steinbeck's language could be described in such terms. Not surprisingly, the resolution devoted one meager paragraph to alleged obscenity—and three much longer paragraphs to the novel's purported libels on Kern County inhabitants.



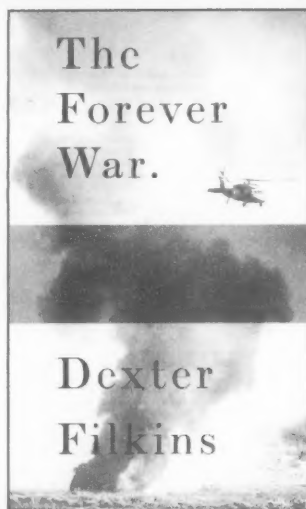
Wartzman uses this comparatively tiny incident to reconstruct a California now far in the past. Politically, the state was torn between left and right, with communism and quasi-fascism at either extreme. Unfailingly fair to all, Wartzman brings to life a rich cast, ranging from the radical journalist Carey McWilliams to the farm worker (whom the author was able to interview many years after the fact) chosen by his employers to burn a copy of *The Grapes of Wrath* on the street. If there was a hero of sorts, it was county librarian Gretchen Knief, who publicly opposed the ban but was forbidden to speak at a meeting that failed to repeal it.

In the end, Kern County's establishment was over-matched. It could not stop people from reading the book. And although the county resolution implored Twentieth Century-Fox to desist from adapting the novel, the film was made and became a classic. Perhaps the only satisfaction that came to Kern County was that the Okies themselves, far from remaining a proletariat, climbed the ladder to become respectable middle-class Republicans. **CJR**

JAMES BOYLAN is the founding editor of the Columbia Journalism Review and professor emeritus of journalism and history at the University of Massachusetts—Amherst.

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Object Lessons

Holland Cotter on truth, beauty, and critical Zen

BY ALLAN M. JALON

THE ART CRITIC HOLLAND COTTER JOINED THE STAFF OF *THE NEW YORK TIMES* in 1998, after six years of freelancing for the paper. Over the last decade, he has focused often on Asian art—and the recent swell of interest in this area has given his work a new centrality. Cotter's following, however, stems from the sheer quality of his style, given as much to wonder as assessment. Jim Schachter, a *Times* editor who was formerly number two in the paper's culture department, puts it this way: "I often think that he is the most wondrous writer at *The New York Times*." And Schachter is hardly alone in this view. When an art-world blogger recently sniped at Cotter's review of a Jasper Johns show, commenters flew to his defense. Regina Hackett, who writes about art for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, responded that "of all the critics out there, I think I might like Cotter the most, not only for his knowledge and insight (lots of critics have that) but for the heart and soul he quietly brings to each piece." Allan M. Jalon, who reports on the arts for the *Los Angeles Times* and other publications, met with the slight, sixty-one-year-old critic at the Cloisters, The Metropolitan Museum of Art's medieval annex, which overlooks the Hudson River from the northern tip of Manhattan—an appropriate setting, since Cotter has written about it on numerous occasions.

Were you aware of the dust-up surrounding your Jasper Johns review? No. Honestly, this is the first I've heard of it.

Do you read blogs? No, but I'm aware of them. There's an enormous opportunity out there for writers. But even e-mails—I find them enormously time-consuming. I'm reading and writing. It's a question of concentrating. It's hard to do it.

You told me you mostly work at home. Is there art on the walls? No. I love blank walls.

Not even a postcard of a favorite writer? I had one of a Buddha, a kind of

Cambodian Buddha, taped to the wall. Then we moved to the new apartment, and it hasn't gone back up.

Were you a show-and-tell personality as a kid? I was a very shy kid. I was not likely to show and tell you anything. I was very bookish. Emily Dickinson was one of my great heroes from when I was ten years old. If you connect with poetry at an early age at all, and you connect with Emily at an early age, you're connecting with language in a very intimate way. She's just constantly handing you these gifts of language. Little explosive things are happening. Then there is also the example of the writer finding in art not just pleasure but also a moral source, an ethical source, a spiritual source. I see art as a huge environment you can live in. It shapes the way you see the world. It truly gives you your eyes.

How did you first enter the world of art? I grew up in a museum-going, book-reading, music-listening family in and around Boston. My mother loved opera; my dad was a jazz and gospel fan. Maria Callas and Mahalia Jackson. All this just gets into your fiber. And when you grow up in Boston, you have the Museum of Fine Arts. I spent most of my Saturdays there. They have the greatest Japanese collection in the United States, as well as a very great Indian collection. I spent a lot of time in front of the Buddhist sculptures.

Do you know that book by Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, about the origins of Buddhism in America? Oh, yes. That's a wonderful book. Boston was a very important place for American Buddhism. Ernest Fenollosa was teaching there—he was the one who started Japanese studies, really, in America. And a bunch of guys in Boston, who loved this art, were known as the Boston Buddhists. This came out of the Transcendentalists. Emerson. It was all a continuum. My father was a lifeguard at Walden Pond. I read Thoreau when I was very young.

Have you ever tried Buddhist meditation? No. I read a lot of stuff. I think one of the reasons the Buddhist



Holland Cotter

"There is no objective perspective on art that makes sense to me."

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sculptures were so attractive to me was that they were foreign enough that I could view them as not art. They didn't fit into a category for me. They could be some sort of communicative device. I view medieval European sculpture, for example, as familiar. The Buddhist sculpture was unfamiliar enough that I could do what I wanted with it.

You could envision your place in it.
Yeah.

And how did that lead to your career as an art critic? As a young person, I never envisioned myself as a journalist. I've never had a path mapped out for myself. I went to college to study the writing of poetry.

Where and with whom? I went to Harvard, and Robert Lowell was teaching there. I was in a graduate writing seminar with him. That was a very interesting experience. Again, my life has not moved in any linear direction. I truly feel that my writing is as much shaped by my experience as by any schooling I've ever had.

What sort of experience are you thinking of? My dad was a doctor. Summer jobs, as a kid, I worked in hospitals. I worked in his hospital, and also in a state hospital for what was called the feeble-minded. Because I was a kid, they figured that wouldn't matter, and they put me in a locked building with adult males who were severely retarded. I was seventeen. That was a very intense experience.

How did it affect you as a writer? It was this very immediate, non-authoritative relationship that you were having with other human beings. And it was a very primal one. They're sick and helpless. You can give something to them. They are relating to you on this very, very basic level: life and death. In a hospital, you talk about things you don't talk about in other places. You discuss your spiritual life. Their transience. Your transience. Because all the other stuff is irrelevant.

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And did you go on to study journalism? No. I'd studied the art of India and Asia as a graduate student. I was teaching an Indian and Islamic art course at Columbia, and began writing as a freelance critic for *Art in America* and other publications.

Could you talk about how you came to the *Times* and your role there? While I was teaching at Columbia, I got a call from the *Times*. I did freelance work for them for a few years, and then they asked if I'd be on staff, and so I said, "Yeah."

And what about your role there? There are actually three full-time art critics at the paper: Michael Kimmelman (who's based in Berlin), Roberta Smith, and you. Was it your own decision to write so extensively about Asian art? One of the reasons the *Times* asked me to work for them was my background in Asian art. I did try to make it clear that I didn't want to be the Asian art writer exclusively. I did not want to be restricted—it's all interrelated for me.

Let's jump ahead to last summer, during which you wrote several stories about China for the *Times*. The first (on page one, no less) was a piece about the Chinese museum scene. In another, you explored the Buddhist sculptures in Dunhuang, at the edge of the Gobi Desert. Were these pieces prompted by the Olympics? Yes. They were supposed to provide some cultural background. But my trip to Dunhuang was a logical extension of layers of interest I've had for years. I went backward in Buddhism. The first Buddhist art I studied was Japanese—in my thirties, I wandered around rural temples in Japan. After that, I thought it would be interesting to go to India and see where the whole thing got started. Then there was all this stuff in between, and Dunhuang was a crucial piece of that historical puzzle for me.

Your personal and journalistic adventures meshed. Oh, yeah. Beautifully. And nobody at the paper gave me any direction: go here; go there. I've always been self-directed, and the paper has encouraged that.

In your Dunhuang piece, you make it clear that you are not, in fact, a Buddhist yourself. Well, that was important for me to say. I don't want people to read what I'm writing as advocacy for a particular faith. I'm coming at this from another place, a human place. I'm hungry for these experiences. Delighted by them. Puzzled by them. The same place that you, the reader, are in. I've been lucky to have had this experience, and now I am giving that luck to others.

So the art critic is a kind of caretaker for certain objects or experiences? I do feel that. Objects represent us. They aren't just manufactured things. They really are extensions of us, particularly art objects, which have been made with a certain amount of love. It's also important to remember that a lot of art has been made for terrible reasons. These are objects of power. And they're persuasive ones. They are beautiful, even though they were meant to advertise power in negative ways.

Perhaps this sense of criticism as a form of caretaking explains why your style often seems so insistently personal. Again, I would like others to have the same experience I have had. That is basically what it comes down to—sharing this joy. I don't feel authoritative about it. I feel like I'm on the same level with my readers.

So conveying your experience is almost as important as giving an opinion? I think that's true. My favorite critics are not art critics, but dance critics. Especially Edwin Denby. I like to read them best—not for stylistic reasons, but because the subject they are writing about is a very ephemeral thing. It basically doesn't exist beyond the performance. The only record is what you write about it, with the kind of language that captures it on the fly. I think of art the same way. There is no objective perspective on it that makes sense to me, really. We're here for a very short time. We're here together. We won't be here very long. The experience is so personal, so fleeting, that I just want to capture it. **CJR**

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Title of publication: Columbia Journalism Review.
Publication number: 0804-780. Date of filing: September 30, 2008. Frequency: Bimonthly. Number of issues published annually: Six. Annual subscription: \$27.95. Address: 2950 Broadway, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027. Publisher: Evan Cornog; Executive Editor: Michael Hoyt; Managing Editor: Brent Cunningham. Owner: Trustees of Columbia University in the City of New York. Known bondholders, mortgages, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, and other securities: None. The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status of this organization for Federal income tax purposes has not changed during the preceding 12 months.

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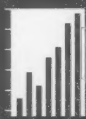
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Funded by a grant from the Las Vegas, Nevada-based
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Voting for Glass Houses

BY MICHAEL SCHUDSON AND DANIELLE HAAS



IN FEBRUARY 2007, NEWLY ELECTED House Speaker Nancy Pelosi hailed the Internet as an “incredible vehicle for transparency” and declared that she looked forward to hearing how the House could be “as open and accessible to citizens as possible.” Three months later, a bipartisan report suggested one way to achieve that: post all legislative information online, including all roll-call votes—ballots cast on the record.

Sounds obvious enough. But while building glass houses of honesty may be an oft-touted goal, it seems that legislators aren’t quite ready to dwell in such structures themselves. Neither house of Congress nor any council of our twenty-five largest cities makes an individual legislator’s votes—on the floor or in committee—available in a simple, downloadable format. Only ten of the ninety-nine state legislative houses provide such records for votes on the floor. More widely available are roll-call votes by bill—as opposed to by specific lawmaker. Admittedly, this can be useful. But it’s rather like publishing school attendance records by day rather than by student. Checking up on your man or woman in Washington via the House or Senate Web site would mean trawling through more than five hundred bills for just one term—the typical number of items that congressional and state legislators deal with during that time.

In recent years, Washington journalists have helped plug this information hole by providing an online roster of roll-call votes by legislator. *Congressional Quarterly*, *National Journal*, and *Gallery Watch* (owned by the publisher of *Roll Call*) each charge for their data, enriching raw roll-call figures with expert judgment. OpenCongress.org, GovTrack.us, and WashingtonPost.org, meanwhile, offer roll-call-by-legislator data for free. We tried it. It’s easy. All three sites provide politicians’ full voting records, as well as analysis of where the representatives’ votes place them in relation to their parties, to political values, or to other members of Congress. *The Washington Post* also offers a list of “key votes,” explaining briefly what they mean and why they matter.

But why leave it to reporters? According to new research by J. H. Snider—the president of iSolon.org, a nonprofit aimed at advancing government transparency through new technologies—it’s not inertia that holds the government back, nor

cost (an unpaid intern could do it), nor lack of demand. It’s not even the novelty of the idea: eight years ago, *Wired* magazine called Congress’s failure to put voting records on the Web part of “the biggest Congressional scandal of the digital age.” Instead, Snider says, it’s simply self-interest. Politicians are ultimately more worried about thwarting the mischief that potential rivals could do with the data than they are interested in educating voters.

In his paper, “Would You Ask Turkeys to Mandate Thanksgiving?” published this summer by Harvard’s Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy (where he was a recent fellow), Snider quotes former Iowa representative Jim Leach on that score: “It’s in the interests of incumbents to have opaque reporting requirements and to maintain control over how votes are disclosed.”

True, readily available roll-call votes could mean easy ammunition for campaign opponents (think of Barack Obama’s charge that John “The Maverick” McCain voted with President Bush 90 percent of the time). And roll-call votes are ripe for manipulation because they can appear to be the opposite of what they are—a vote against new anti-smoking laws might be a lawmaker holding out for still-tougher regulations.

And then there’s the added risk, Snider tells CJR, that exposed voting information would create “even greater incentives for politicians to structure roll-call votes for PR purposes rather than democratic accountability.”

Still, at the end of the day, greater transparency in roll-call voting would only promote accountability. Democracy needs more information, not less, and Snider insists that politicians, not journalists, provide it. By keeping media outlets (not to mention intrepid citizen journalists) needlessly tied up with busywork counting yeas and nays, Congress isn’t overtly infringing on freedom of the press, but it is bleeding its time and resources. **CJR**

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The Lower Case

Bush lands in Texas; Residents urged to leave

CNN.com 9/16/08

NEW YORK FIRE FIGHTERS BURN CENTER

Staten Island Advance 8/25/08

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Bellingham (WA) Herald 6/8/08

His top contenders are said to include Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty and former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney. Less traditional choices mentioned include former Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Ridge, an abortion-rights supporter, and Connecticut Sen. Joe Lieberman, the Democratic vice presidential pick in 2000 who now is an independent.

The Associated Press 8/17/08

**Altoona
choir
to be
clothed**

(Eau Claire, WI) Leader-Telegram 7/22/08

*The Solution to Hunting's Woes?
Setting Sights on Women*

The Wall Street Journal 10/1/08

**Russian navy ships head to
Venezuela**

The Associated Press 9/22/08

Dogs shot by sheriff's deputies known to run loose

The Seattle Times 9/9/08

**Minus Shorts, Banks
Get Breathing Room**

The Wall Street Journal 9/22/08

Clarification

Former White House press secretary Ari Fleischer said he misspoke when he stated in The Journal News that President George W. Bush watched "SportsCenter" at night in his residence instead of reading his briefings for the next day. Fleischer wanted to clarify that Bush did read his briefings while watching "SportsCenter."

(White Plains, NY) The Journal News 7/30/08

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